



Following the Call to Mission Overseas

by Mary Oldham

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Where does mission begin? Perhaps in a memory, a word, a whisper, or an internal presence that draws you out of yourself. The idea for me to follow the call to mission started long ago with volunteering. At first, it was an hour or so a week scheduled into my busy life. Yet the Holy Spirit does not stop speaking, and over time, through ideas that resonated deep within, conversations with others, and prayer, I realized I was ready to devote myself to following the call to mission. In 2009, I joined Maryknoll Lay Missioners and was sent to Kenya to serve our brothers and sisters in impoverished communities.

If I were to analyze my decision to follow God's call to mission, I know I could point to different aspects of my own formation that guided me. Besides knowing about my faith, learning to live a moral life as Jesus' follower, and praying and participating in the sacramental life of the Church, I also felt Jesus' call to become more connected to the life and mission of the Church. This call enabled me to reach out to others—especially the poor—and be a witness to Christ's Good News by word and example.

Here's what the Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC) says about the Church's missionary nature and lay people's participation in the life and mission of the Church:

It is from God's love for all men that the Church in every age receives both the obligation and the vigor of her missionary dynamism, "for the love of Christ urges us on." Indeed, God "desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth"; that is, God wills the salvation of everyone through the knowledge of the truth. Salvation is found in the truth. Those who obey the prompting of the Spirit of truth are already on the way of salvation. But the Church, to whom this truth has been entrusted, must go out to meet their desire, so as to bring them the truth. Because she believes in God's universal plan of salvation, the Church must be missionary. (CCC, 2nd. ed. [Washington, DC: Libreria Editrice Vaticana–United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2000], no. 851)

Lay believers are in the front line of Church life; for them the Church is the animating principle of human society. Therefore, they in particular ought to have an ever-clearer consciousness not

only of belonging to the Church, but of being the Church, that is to say, the community of the faithful on earth under the leadership of the Pope, the common Head, and of the bishops in communion with him. They are the Church. (no. 899)

While the baptized are called to serve the mission of the Church anywhere they find themselves, some are called to embrace the Church's mission by serving as missionaries in foreign lands.

My journey into mission had two defining moments. First was the moment I read a blog entry about seeing the face of Christ in orphaned children on the other side of the world. The Holy Spirit was giving me courage to alter the direction of my life. The Holy Spirit was leading me to imitate Jesus' call for his followers to "love one another. As I have loved you, so you also should love one another" (Jn 13:34). I knew that this was something I wanted to experience.

After arriving in Kenya, I struggled to know to which ministry I was being called. During a visit to an AIDS clinic, I realized I wanted to work with people who are affected by AIDS. It is a disease wrought with stigma and fear, a modern-day leprosy. Here was a concrete way that I could show a special concern for the poor and the alienated. I now work with children who have been orphaned by AIDS or who live in a single-parent family with an HIV-positive guardian. We strive to help them find hope for the future through education or vocational training. In the process, we witness to God's love for them, who are made in the image and likeness of God (see Gn 1:26-27) no matter what their circumstances in life might be. Quite often, those we serve

teach us about faith, hope, love, prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance as they face and overcome the everyday obstacles they face.

My work is in the slums surrounding Mombasa. The living conditions for the families I serve are very difficult. Only with great perseverance can some manage to succeed in the face of overwhelming circumstances. Three years ago, the project I coordinate assisted a young woman whose widowed mother could no longer pay her high school fees. She graduated at the top of her district and has just started her first year as a university student. She is the hope of her family. With two brothers too sick to work and an orphaned nephew who is HIV-positive, she will have a heavy burden to carry. But with her education and a good job, their future will be brighter. I am so proud to be part of her journey.

Pius is another young man who has taught me about joy and perseverance. He is a sixteen-year-old who has never been to school. He has limited muscle movement and speech that is difficult to decipher, but his spirit shines through. Next year he will start first grade. I was a link in a chain of connections that helped him get his first wheelchair. On the way, we walked through a muddy cow lot, crossed an open ravine on shaky planks, and drove around crater-sized potholes. But his joy at being able to move himself around was beyond words. We sang all the way home.

Mission is not just about giving and receiving blessings, it is also about conversion. This conversion is sometimes in those I serve and sometimes my own. I have been reminded so many times of the common Swahili saying Mungu yupo (God is here). My experiences of mission call

me to be more open to God's presence around me. As I visit people in their simple homes made of mud or broken bricks and covered with grass thatching, iron sheets, or plastic tarps, I am humbled to be welcomed into their lives and to be reminded Mungo yupo. God is here.

In offering myself—all of who I am—to serve the poor as a Maryknoll lay missionary, I have found joy, and I have struggled. Often I have more questions than solutions. But our faith reminds us to be hopeful, to believe that with God all things are possible. We encounter many challenges and many unknowns, but also many moments of grace: teaching a young girl to multiply; encouraging students to believe in themselves; admiring a student's new skill in sewing; connecting a troubled

youth with a professional counselor; listening to the struggles of a grandmother as she cares for the children of her departed children; learning, accompanying, making mistakes, and then trying again.

As Catholics, our common Baptism calls us to embrace the Church's mission whether that journey takes us home or overseas. It is both a joy and a struggle to seek to share what we have been given—faith, hope, and love—and to remind others Mungo yupo. God is here. This journey has led me not only around the world, but also deeper within myself and deeper within the life and mission of the Church. I am grateful for all that I have received. May our faith continue to lead us all into mission. Welcome to the journey.

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