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Along a path unsought and unknown

Locky Flanagan CSSp

October 1980: touch down in Chileka airport, Malawi. Even before the door opened the steaming heat enveloped me. I knew I was no longer in Canada or Ireland. No! I was in Malawi, “The Warm Heart of Africa” as the tourist slogan puts it. “Warm?” “Sizzling,” would be more accurate.

After the slow-moving line-ups for documents and baggage, I was hugged and welcomed. Then whisked away to Ndirande Spiritan parish, Blantyre (the largest city). To a cold shower, a hearty meal (with some unfamiliar dishes), drinks and sharing of news and doings. Later I wondered did I hear: “October is the hottest month?” If it was, then there was hope. Yet I pondered, as I lay down under the mosquito net, “What have I done with my life?” “What indeed...?”

When I joined the Spiritans, my expectation was to work in Africa or Brazil. Now I had the opportunity to realize this teenage longing. Like Steinbeck in *Travels with Charley*, I saw in myself “what I was to see many times in others — a look of longing.”

After six years in Canada, the Canadian prairie fall began to rule over the summer evenings as the rounds of leave-taking ran their course. Separation was inevitable from a loved and loving parish community, where I was cared for and blessed: tears flowed, not least my own, as I departed with an ache in my heart.

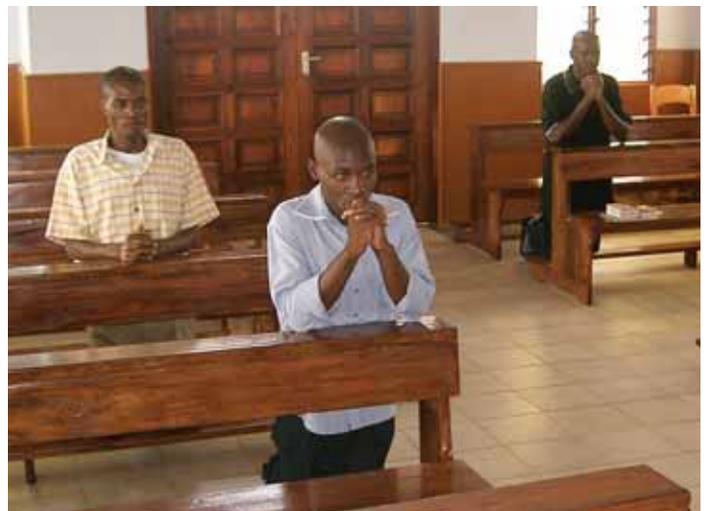
Farewell Canada

Yes — Coaldale continued to have a hold on me. It was the parish, which back in secondary school in Kildare, Ireland, Br. Finbarr had set me up for, when he pondered aloud one February day in 1959: “Flanagan, you would make a grand parish priest in a nice quiet country parish!” A chord was struck, and as the vibration continued it caused me to

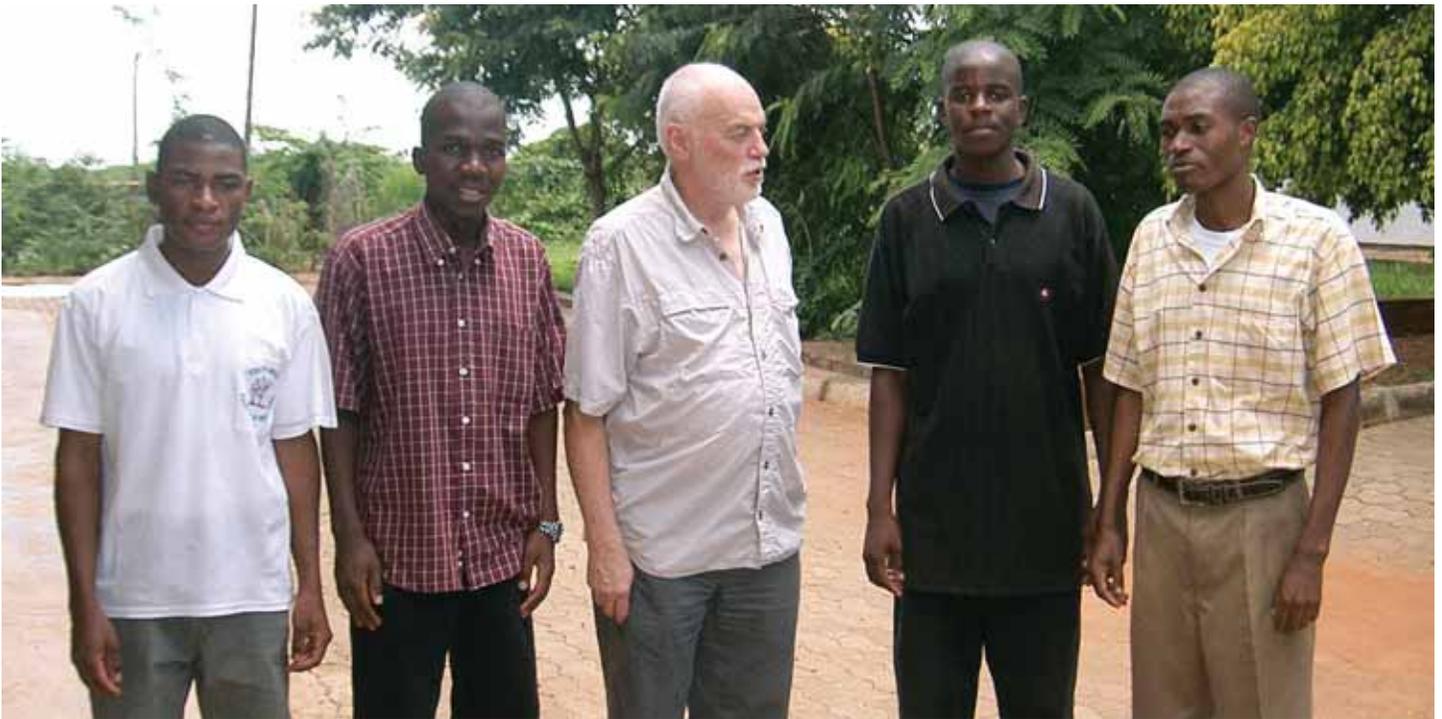
question and ponder. I heard him say: “There is more in you than you see in yourself.”

Was it God talk? Later I came to believe it was true — God really sees more in us than we see in ourselves. It was indeed a blessed moment of freedom and focus in my life. Yes! Scary too, as I began to reach out to take hold of “the vibration”: the growing discovery of embarking on a journey of risk and challenge, on a pilgrimage of mustering trust and giving birth to the “inner being.”

I pray that the Father out of his glorious riches may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to



The seminary chapel in Balaka, Malawi.



Fr Locky interacting with seminarians.

know this love that surpasses knowledge — that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than we can ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work in us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus in all generations forever and ever! Amen. (Ephesians 3:16-21)

This prayer of Paul I treasure since 1973 on a handmade and exquisitely written ordination card from three reverend sister friends. It highlights for me the loving contribution of many relatives, friends and parishioners in various parishes, not least my native Kildare. For all, living and dead, my ongoing prayer and gratitude, for you are the community who nourished my vocation.

A vocation

It may all sound like God talk: “a revelatory moment,” “inner being,” “a priest comes from the people for the people.” Yet it was to become the compass for setting my sights along a path unsought and unknown. There has to be “Someone” else involved, it can’t be just my idea or that of a teacher or significant person or experience or whatever in one’s life. For sure, vocation is the plan of God. Initially it covers one in much uncertainty as one seeks to figure out what is from me in all of this and what is from God who calls. I have no doubt that entering into the vocation of marriage involves similar elements.

January 2010: Needless to say, my journey to the priesthood bears influence on how I interact with the students here at the seminary (PO Box 221, Balaka, Malawi). The “inner

being,” that hidden goodness awaiting birth in each of us, is linked with the deep desire to serve. St Augustine spoke of it as restlessness in one’s heart which only God can fill. To love as God loves, not likely having to die for someone, but practicing sacrificial love and service in other ways: listening, helping, encouraging, giving — in particular among the marginalized, neglected, voiceless.

During this year dedicated by Pope Benedict to priests, with the theme *Faithfulness of Christ, Faithfulness of Priests*

We know that not all become priests, yet we believe that each one is called to make a difference.

we Spiritans count on your kind prayers and support, as we pray and encourage our students to become faithful and godly men. We know that not all become priests, yet we believe that each one is called to make a difference. Hence, besides philosophy, we emphasize human and community development, religious and social studies, servant leadership skills coupled with ministry to youth, the sick and the elderly in area villages.

You, for sure, are most welcome into partnership with us and are assured of remembrance in our daily community Mass and prayer. ■

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