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A new episode in my life

Locky Flanagan CSSp

I could not believe that I had said, so spontaneously: “It appeals to me!”

My term as superior was up, I had a few months of sabbatical, and then “up for grabs” regarding a new ministry. I thought of parish ministry. I even mentioned it to the new administration as the most likely “job” for me.

However, within the same week, I was asked: “Would you return to Malawi as spiritual director to our philosophy semi-

narians in southern Africa?” What didn’t appeal to me was the oppressive heat of the seminary location and the mosquitoes. The food and the slower pace of life I could manage.

I took pause and gave some thought. I felt the Lord in all of this, a sense, to quote Julian of Norwich, that “All will be well and in all manner of ways, all will be well.” I knew the one appeal it had for me was the call into a new episode in my life.



Spiritual director

Somehow, rightly or wrongly, I believed that as a priest I should be able to mentor people as a spiritual director. Yet at the same time, I felt that I would likely gain more from the “doing” than the seminarians. I boned up with some workshops and books on aspects of spiritual direction. I was really struck when at one workshop, the conductor of it asked no one in particular: “What is your deepest desire?” One offered a response. He got the nod. “I desire to serve.” On hearing, all of us participants nodded our heads. We collectively agreed.

Who could ever know what is going to be around the corner on our life’s journey?

The desire to become a priest

Certainly, now in Malawi, as the seminarians share their stories, a deeper picture of African life opens up to me.

As boys when many of them served Mass, more than a few were struck by the wonderful ritual surrounding big celebrations. All five senses were brought into play: the splendid vestments of the bishop, incense, candles, bells, singing, the spontaneous movement and responses from the people. Their priest, Sister, teacher, close family friend often asked, “Have you ever thought of the priesthood?” Through a respected person, a celebration, an event, family upbringing, prayer, peaceful moments, the desire to become a priest enters hearts.

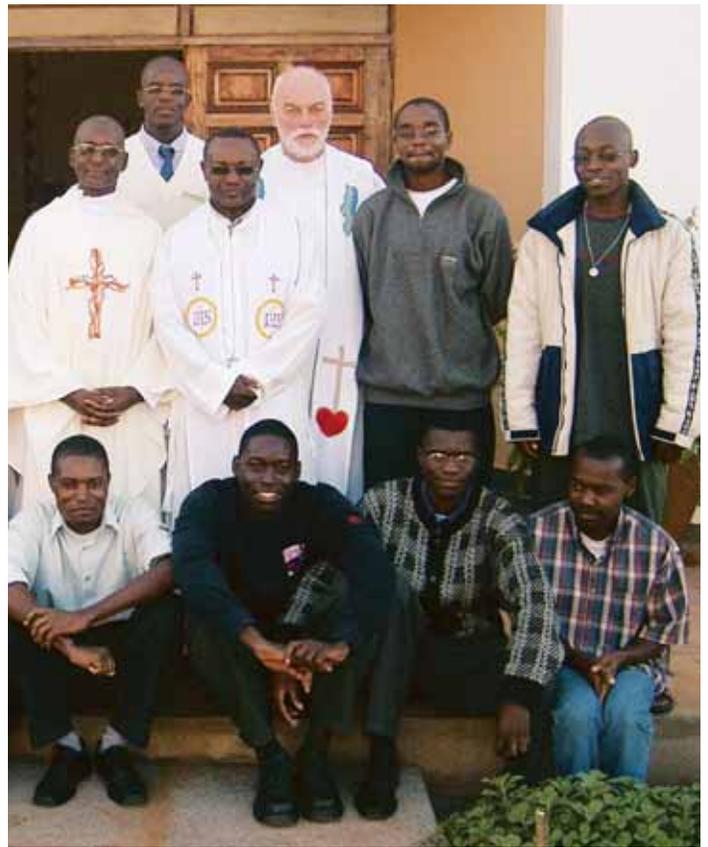
Some of the students find it hard to leave home. They may grapple with questions like: Who will care for my aging parents? Some return home to assist their mom or dad.

However, at the seminary we endeavor to highlight the truth, which our faith teaches, that each one of us has been created for a purpose, and that our life does have meaning. Be assured that in our corner of the vineyard we can make a difference for the betterment of people’s lives.

Friends of the Spiritans

A tremendous blessing for us in recent years has been the coming together of a dozen or more people within Malawi whom we affectionately call: “Friends of the Spiritans”. Friends who reveal our value and importance by their loving support, prayers, contributions and deep interest in the well-being of our seminarians.

I visited a number of their families. They spoke of extended family, orphans, the death of loved ones, unemployment, and hunger. The “chat” centred on a way of life — very simple and really basic, yet hard — with cries of hope and a prayer for favourable elements. Sustenance farming and old fashioned banking methods — a small amount hidden. No big upheaval in lifestyle due to economic downturn.



Locky Flanagan with Spiritan staff and seminarians.

Making their parish their own

The families I met very much appreciate their faith and the opportunity to be involved in their parish. Family members assist in small prayer groups and Basic Christian Communities, school, clinic, day care for orphans and Home Based Care groups for HIV/AIDS patients. The sisters, priests and catechists over the years emphasized the baptismal dignity of their people as children of a loving God, and encouraged their involvement. The goal — invite the people to make their parish their own.

Diversity of my ministry

As a Spiritan priest, this new opportunity in my life certainly deepens my appreciation for the wonderful diversity of ministry that I have experienced: parish, youth, vocation, formation, administration, mission overseas in bush and shanty town, teaching and now mentoring in a seminary. Engaging in the footprints of so many people. Even fund-raising for the formation of our seminarians.

For sure, I appreciate parishes and friends for your kind support and prayers. The formation of priests depends on a significant support system, involving prayer, contributions and encouragement. Who could ever know what is going to be around the next corner on our life’s journey? In a life with a multitude of blessings, I have now more brothers and sisters, moms and dads, than I ever could imagine. ■