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# Why Have I Come?

*Emeka Nzeadibe, CSSp*



**W**hat could move a young Nigerian Spiritan to opt for a missionary insertion in a context where successive socialist governments have left a lasting impression on minds, people and structures? Is it meaningful to embark on such an adventure in a post-Marxist society? These were the questions I asked myself before setting out for Rostock.

To get a feel of what it would be like, to see things for myself, to visit the confreres who were already there and to hear their stories, I made a trip to the city in 2003. What I saw and heard confirmed my initial intuition. After a nine month intensive language course, I moved in March 2005 to Rostock. What then does coming to work in Rostock represent for me? A little background information may serve to make the point clearer and the contrast sharper.

My name is Emeka Nzeadibe. I come from Nguru Mbaise in south-eastern part

of Nigeria, Igboland. The church there is young and dynamic. Its presence in the public sphere is taken for granted. For most people, it is almost unimaginable to live without faith or religion. Rostock, where I work, is a town situated along the Baltic Sea coast on the north-east of Germany, in the Mecklenburg region. It was part of the Eastern Bloc. During the German Democratic Republic period, religion practically went underground. The Christians who held forth had it rough. Today 80% of the population has nothing to do with God, church or religion. They simply ignore it. Among the remaining 20%, 15% are Protestants and 5% Catholics. That means that the Rostock Spiritans meet a largely dechristianised population. How then do I find a way of being a missionary in such a place, where to believe is an exception and not believing is as normal as the air you breathe? What is the meaning of my presence and activities here?

## Meeting – encounter

To put down roots in Rostock, I need to be just like my confreres, Johannes Henschel and John Doyle: be open, meet people eye to eye, and reach out for the un-beaten paths. Taking refuge behind the priestly garb or clerical functions is out of the question. Putting down roots means going beyond the frontiers of the parish to be there for the people who are searching, those whom the classical pastoral approach cannot reach, to be present in non-church settings. In this regard, my missionary presence in Rostock is rooted in the Concept “Meeting-Encounter” whether in the Parish community, at the University, among the youth or the immigrants. Meeting people involves being interested in their stories and questions, joys and difficulties and having time for them. It involves above all an ability to move into situations that apparently have nothing to do with being a priest, but everything to do with being

Photos: Emeka Nzeadibe, CSSp celebrates World Youth Day and Corpus Christi Mass in Germany.

human. I am not just there to exercise an office, to administer sacraments, to sell my wares or to tell them what they cannot do. A good measure of flexibility and an easy-going attitude are therefore prerequisites for these unknown sites.

### **Being an African priest**

It may interest you to know that being an African priest here makes a lot of difference. It makes me stand out in so many situations, especially when I take on assignments, or speak in public or celebrate outside our normal Catholic community. The Rostockers are simply not used to it. Africa for most of them is a far off land, which has

### **Other Africans**

There are about 280 Africans in Rostock. They perceive my presence as something positive. Some of them have been in the city for years, attended church services and worship, but still were scarcely noticed or given any attention. One told me that each time he sees me at the altar, he has a particular sense of elation. He added that their presence can no longer be ignored. One referred to me as a "Figure of Identification". That, of course, I find difficult to accept, but it is very important for them. They recently held an election, to choose those who would represent their interests in the City. I was invited to the election.

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little to do with their immediate perception except as a continent of wars, woes and worries.

I met a lady some time ago. She asked me, "In which asylum-seeker centre are you?" I told her that I was a priest. She asked, "A Catholic priest?" I said, "Yes". She told me that she was also a Catholic. There and then we began a deep dialogue. After an ecumenical religious service in the Rostock university church, which I presided, someone approached me and asked "Are you aware that today is probably the first time an African priest celebrated in the university church, since the foundation in 1419?" I said, "That's great, historic!" After another ecumenical service I had a chat with the Landessuperintendent (i.e. Bishop) of the Lutherans in Mecklenburg. He marveled at the fact that I work in Rostock, saying that in their church it was not possible. Last summer, Lutheran pastor Johannes Henschel and I went to bless a lifeboat for the Fire Brigade on the sea-coast. The tourists were on the beach and the locals were there as well. You could imagine the spectacle and the curiosity an African priest on their Baltic seacoast triggered off. After the blessing, we were driven in the lifeboat for half an hour. I thoroughly enjoyed it!

Before it began, one of them said "We have a priest here, let him conduct the election. At least he will be honest!" The others supported him enthusiastically and I conducted it. It was quite honest.

### **Learning their language and culture**

From the very beginning, I was conscious of the fact that my integration into German society presupposed a mastery of the language and an intelligent access to the cultural codes. From my earlier experience of learning French, I knew that it could be frustrating to begin from zero, to see myself just like a child who could not adequately express himself, while what I wanted to say was crystal clear in my mind. My command of the German language, though not perfect, is for the people I meet amazing. Besides, on arrival in Rostock. I took a course on culture and civilization at the University with a view to understanding the people I meet, their background, what gets them going, what forms their mentality and ways of life. I am happy that the people I meet do not have any particular difficulties understanding me. This makes communication flow freely, eases contacts and invariably contributes to breaking barriers and prejudices.

However, even with an adequate knowledge of the language, the learning is not yet over. A closer attention to people and things unfolds ways of being and doing that are particular to the people. For instance, the reflective aspect of the liturgy, which gives the impression of being distant (or outright dry) is striking. It is certainly far from the full-of-life, and the *joie de vivre* liturgies in Igboland. However that is not a sign that the people do not know how to celebrate. But I think it says something about them, about their society, culture and style of communication. Mecklenburgers are thought to be a rather distant and cold bunch, when they do not know you or when they are learning to know you. But if they trust you, they open their hearts to you. I have experienced this particular quality. When I speak or interact with them they usually seem to "want some more".

### **With the students**

Moreover being young and coming from another culture gives me access to other layers of the population: students of the Rostock University, foreign students and young people. Knowledge of English, French, and German comes into ready use in these areas. I reach out to them through Sports and Students' Clubs, through soirees, forums for discussion, prayer circle etc. With the students I go to the beach parties or discothèque and dancing. I also do inline-skating, and play volleyball.

Being a Missionary in this context then means "being there": with your person and personality. Being there creates possibilities that only presence can bring about. The people I meet get to know me, to know that I am also human and that I am interested in them as persons. They also get to know my convictions and what I stand for. At the same time a bridge is built for further possibilities. It is all about being a modest witness to reconciliation among people and cultures. Our international team in Rostock, by its intercultural make-up, bears witness to this fact. It is a sign which speaks far more than words.

For me, the Rostock Project is not only an authentic missionary challenge; it is a great opportunity to bring the Good News of Jesus to a people who have lost it, to walk with them in the manner of the earliest missionaries in our Church, to live with them in the hope of a brighter future. ■