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Mercy sister finds joy in community thanks to Nigerian roots

by Sr. Camille D'Arienzo

Conversations with Sr. Camille

A few years ago, the Sisters of Mercy formation ministers invited me to give a talk to the novices in Laredo, Texas.

When I entered the chapel one morning before dawn, I became conscious of another presence. Mary Oladimeji was deep in prayer. This conversation affords me the opportunity to learn more about this amazing woman and to share my findings with a larger audience. Today, Mary, a finally professed Sister of Mercy, lives in California, but let's go back to her beginnings in Lagos, the former capital of Nigeria.

***Sr. Camille:* What was your childhood like?**

Oladimeji: I was born to Clara and Andrew Oladimeji in Lagos, the biggest commercial center of Africa. I spent my growing-up years between Lagos and my ancestral home in Oro with my grandmother and extended family. When I was 6, I went to live with my grandmother. Following the mass migrations of the generations of my grandfather and father to the different cities' centers, it became a practice to send children of school age back to the village to live with grandparents in order for them to learn the language, customs, traditions, rituals and family history. It also gave them the opportunity to receive a Catholic education, which was subsidized through levies and fundraising by our working parents and grandparents. Following the conversion of my community to Catholicism, the people built elementary schools and secondary schools for boys and girls and asked the then-prefecture to invite female and male religious orders to help run the schools. My community is currently celebrating its hundred years of Catholicism.

What was it like to live with your grandmother?

The connection with her and the larger family was idyllic. Our life revolved around family, community and the church. Our parents came home for major festivals, family celebrations and for Christmas and Easter. We children went to the cities for our long summer holidays. Sometimes I'd spend my long vacations between Lagos and my mother's, grandmother's or my great-grandmother's village. Relatives shared our family's culture and history. Whenever I visited these rural villages, my mother's eldest sister would make the 65-mile journey on foot to come sell her locust beans in the village.

That's a very long walk! Was that a common way of traveling?

Well, after market, she and I, in the company of other women, would walk about 20 miles, staying with relatives along the way, and continue our journey the next day. But if the moon was full, we might walk all the way home that night. My aunt would send a message to my grandfather through women leaving the market early, so he would know when to expect us.

What was he like?

My grandfather was a convert from Yoruba traditional religion to Islam. He was a high-ranking member of the Egungun cult and a renowned *egun elewe* dancer (masquerades cult). So I grew up practicing Catholicism while observing festivals of Islam and traditional Yoruba religions. I also would attend Qur'anic school with my cousins when I visited my grandmothers' villages.

What brought you to the United States?

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I came to the United States 10 years ago at the invitation of my sister, Margaret, who has lived in California since the early '80s. I had been in a religious community in Africa that was not a good fit for me. Margaret said there were numerous religious communities in the U.S. that I could look into.

How did you discover the Sisters of Mercy?

Through the pastor of St. Francis of Assisi in Sacramento, Calif., where my sister and her family worship. Sr. Michelle Gorman was the vocation director at the time. I was touched by her simplicity and exuberant joy. This initial encounter pretty much drew me to Mercy. By the end of my live-in experience with the sisters in Auburn, Calif., I knew I wanted to spend the rest of my life with these women. I entered the Sisters of Mercy of Auburn in 2004.

Then what happened?

Laredo, Texas, happened. Having spent 13 years in an apostolic community, I was reluctant to do a second novitiate. But I consider my experience in Laredo a very graced time. The six others in my group were amazing women and we became much more than a group. We developed lasting friendships. One reason for this was that we shared at a very deep level during our classes and prayer. It was not all cozy, as we also challenged one another and pushed one another to greater love beyond pettiness. More importantly, we called one another to take a hard look at both our formed and emerging thought processes. This stretched us beyond our comfort zones.

There were surely many cultural differences between your life in Nigeria and that in the States. Please describe the most outstanding among them.

My first shock happened when returning from Mass on Christmas. I asked my sister if neighbors and friends would be coming to celebrate with us. She said no one was coming. I cried inwardly. But my biggest shock by far occurred when I was working at Loaves and Fishes, a day shelter for homeless individuals. It took a couple of months for me to understand that to be homeless did not mean the individuals I served didn't have a home built with their money; it meant they absolutely have nowhere to call home. In my African community, no one is homeless. Family members share their homes. Your brother's home is your home, and your sister's home is your home. Your parents' home is your home.

What do you miss most?

I miss the communal spirit. The well-being of a member of the community is the responsibility of the entire community. Where I grew up, communal responsibility trumps "personal freedom" and "individual rights." When an individual is on the path of self-destruction and cannot make an intelligent decision because of mental illness, or if his decision is not in the best interest of the whole, then the community acts to protect him and the rest of the community from harm. I cannot tell you how baffling it is for me to see mentally ill people left to suffer and harm themselves because it would be a violation of their individual rights if they are "forced" to take their medication. The same goes for protecting the constitutional right of every adult male to bear firearms when the safety of the greater number could be jeopardized. Don't get me wrong; there's a lot to be said for individual rights and the environment that engenders them.

What else do you miss?

I miss fresh-tasting foods and special spices and ingredients. I miss cockcrows at dawn, human activities and sounds announcing a new day. I miss the smell of firewood mingled with aromas of dishes in the morning and evening air, and the special-tasting food cooked in earthen pots. I miss the rivers, streams, springs and rivers. I miss the forests, the smell of the earth when it rains, the sounds of millions of creatures that come to life at the onset of the first rain, the tropical thunderstorms. I miss the village festivals and communal gatherings. I miss colorfully dressed people. I miss the rich language with its use of idioms and proverbs to convey meanings. I miss the repertoire of greetings and the meanings they convey.

Where did you attend school?

I did both primary and secondary schools in my village. For my undergraduate degree, I went to University of Ibadan, where I studied English language and African literature in English. Apart from being one of the important cultural centers for Yoruba people and a center of learning, Ibadan is the largest city in West Africa. University of Ibadan is the first university in Nigeria built under the colonial administration, hence its high reputation throughout the world. For my graduate degree, I studied international and multicultural education with human rights emphasis at the University of San Francisco. For my field project, I created a curriculum for training youth and educators in nonviolent activism. Since finishing my studies, I've had the opportunity to take part in the Gandhi Legacy Tour in India. During the tour, I studied under Gandhi's grandson, Arun, and his great-grandson, Tushar. I was also invited to pilot my curriculum at an all-boys' Catholic boarding school in Nigeria, where I trained 40 students in nonviolent engagement.

What are your professional goals?

My hope is to be able to train more young people and educators to instill nonviolence in their communities. With the advent of violence in my home country of Nigeria, the need is greater, and every educator and some stakeholders, such as bishops, priests and religious, recognize the timeliness of such a program. But funding remains a big factor. Socializing young people in nonviolence in an era of global terrorism, both foreign and home-grown, is crucial to world peace. It is more so in places where terrorists cash in on people's desperation, lack of opportunity and poverty. Young people are easily seduced as recruits for terrorism. I would also love to share the experience I have gathered in my time of living with needy families in the U.S.

Did you have role models?

For every African proverb, there is the apparent meaning, and there is always the hidden meaning. For example, "It takes a village to raise a child" also implies that the "village" takes upon itself the responsibility to mentor informally and formally through rituals and rites of passages. The young learn mostly by imitating and observing the adults in the community and through the oral transmission of life, culture and belief systems. My grandmother, Agnes Ovenihun, made the greatest impact on not just me, but our entire family. She was funny without effort, fearless, wise, generous and highly devoted to her family. She was never afraid to stand up for what was right. Her commitment to justice and using her voice for those too fearful to speak for themselves remain a source of inspiration for me.

What is your favorite scripture passage?

I have always loved the scriptures. As a matter of fact, I learned to read by reading the Bible. As a young girl, I loved the parables and I have many Old Testament favorites, like the story of Moses and the Israelites. I have always found many of the psalms true to many of my human emotions of joy, sorrow, anger, indignation, helplessness, peace, etc. There are two passages in particular. The first is Isaiah 43:12: "Those who hope in the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall run and not grow weary, they shall walk and not faint." The second is from John's Gospel, "Put your net to the deep for a catch."

These scripture passages have often offered me consolation and the push I need to act, in spite of my fears.

What is your image of God?

God for me is an ever-present spirit and a friend. God is a parent and a companion with the stability of my grandmother and the unconditional love of my mother and my aunts.

Has it changed?

No, it gets stronger daily. The more I come to appreciate the love of a person like those close to me, the more I come to see God's love visible in human form.

What about your faith is most meaningful to you?

I do believe as St. James says, "Faith without work is dead." As a hands-on pragmatist, I have very little patience for a pie-in-the-sky type of faith. Growing up in a culture where community played a huge role in formation and achievements, church as a family of believers speaks to my deep cultural values of communal sharing where no one lacks basic necessities of life such as food and shelter.

What else influenced your belief system?

The Yoruba culture with its pantheon of deities taught me tolerance and respect for other belief systems and ways of being. My mother's family is Muslim, and many have made the pilgrimage to Mecca. Members of my father's family are mostly Catholics, with some Muslims and traditional Yoruba devotees. Being a member of such families groomed me to see life beyond black and white and to cultivate openness and a disposition of heart that recognize that no one has a monopoly on the truth.

How do you pray?

For more than 20 years, I have practiced centering prayer and meditation. I use the daily liturgical readings for my daily prayer. After reading the scripture passages slowly, I then sit in silence while allowing God's love to enfold me while paying attention to feelings that might surface. The daily discipline for me is to dwell in that love that God in Jesus holds to me daily.

What do you want from Catholicism?

I wish for my church to claim and celebrate its identity as a community of sinners loved and redeemed by Jesus. I wish for my church to be home where all are truly welcome. I wish for the leadership of the church to reflect the leadership of service and stewardship of Jesus of Nazareth rather than the brazen power that continues to plague the church.

What in contemporary Catholicism encourages or distresses you?

I am most encouraged by the simple but ardent faith of the laity, especially in poor countries. I am encouraged by the faithful service of the religious sisters, brothers and catechists who keep the faith alive, especially when it is difficult and dangerous to stand by those who suffer and are without a voice. Like many lay faithful, I am saddened by the failure of our church to live up to the spirit of Jesus by truly listening to the signs of our times by letting the spirit lead us to be light and salt to our darkened world.

Do you plan to return to Nigeria?

As you know, I entered the former Auburn region before the formation of the new communities. I belong to the West Midwest Community and the Institute of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas. As I discern future ministry, I maintain an open disposition to where the spirit might be leading me. For now, I need to establish firm roots here.

What causes you sorrow?

Seeing people live in subhuman conditions, children living without hope and prospects for the future, dissensions, all the confusion going on in the church at the moment.

What causes you joy?

The joy of community, when people live with dignity, children laughing.

What gives you hope?

Anytime I see people organizing to make a difference in spite of the forces of evil and greed they have to contend with.

Mary, you give me hope. Thank you.

[Mercy Sr. Camille D'Arienzo, broadcaster and author, narrates *Stories of Forgiveness*, a book about people whose experiences have caused them to consider the possibilities of extending or accepting forgiveness. The audio book is available through the book's website, storiesofforgiveness.com.]

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