

## SUSCIPE ME, DOMINE... ET NON CONFUNDAS ME!

*“Uphold me, O Lord, according to your promise and I shall live! And let me not be disappointed in my hope.” Ps 118: 116*

On February 2, 1977, I sang this chant for the first time, offering my whole being to the Lord. We were 4 novices, ranging in age from 29 to 23. I was about to be 26. Our monastery, Notre Dame of Koubri, founded in 1963, had been in existence for 14 years. We had four older sisters from Burkina Faso; the entire community numbered 15 members, including our three French foundresses. The monastery was not yet autonomous, but it was already self-supporting to a certain extent. It was well integrated into the local Church, and the small guest house of 7 rooms welcomed many religious sisters from the diocese of Ouagadougou and beyond. Our three remunerative activities allowed us to live decently and to help those around us. Even though we experienced the usual difficulties inherent in all community life, in human terms, the future of our monastery seemed bright!

Making life profession in such a context, taking this decisive step in committing myself to live in this monastery until my death, was an uplifting experience that gave me real happiness. Ever since the day that the call of my God imposed itself on me as it were, I have never hesitated about my vocation. I saw no reason to doubt God at this decisive stage of my life! I had no regrets about leaving anyone or anything. On the contrary, living separated from the world, far from the city and relatively far from my family, in a life of silence, in certain solitude...I loved all of that very deeply, I found there my pleasure and all my joy. I had the feeling that this setting had been made just for me, as the unique place where I could blossom in a life of intimacy with the Lord and communion with my sisters...Sisters whom I had not chosen, but who I realized had received the same call! In spite of our differences, we tried to understand and above all to accept one another, and we loved one another. Wanting to share our concerns and pains, we were going to spur each other on and stimulate each other in sisterly love on the path of conversion in a happy walk towards the Lord! During all these years of formation, the community to which I was committing myself had showed me sufficiently the extent to which they welcomed me and accepted me as I was. I was thus allowed all my hopes, all my dreams. The Lord was everything for me: a Friend, of course, Master and Savior, “Rock of my heart...my portion forever”, (Cf. Ps 72, Ps 15), my Hope forever!

To love with all my love, to have as my ideal to “live continually in the presence of God,” and above all to “prefer nothing to the love of Christ”... the Rule of St. Benedict answered my deepest aspirations! And in the deepest part of myself I was equally nourished by another reality that fulfilled all my hopes: “At the heart of the Church, my mother, I shall be love!” This enthusiastic cry of St. Theresa upon discovering her personal call in the Carmelite convent: I wanted to make it mine.

“They will truly be monks if they live by the work of their hands,” RB 48. Cooking, cleaning the yard, taking care of the chickens, making yoghurt, or working in the large orchard... This life of simple work allowed me, with my sisters, to share the condition of all people. I was happy.

In this relatively tranquil corner of the bush, the days passed peacefully, like calm, clear water! And then the first ripples appeared on the surface of this sweet water... The first unexpected and troubling event in a series of "small and large vexations" appeared a week after my profession: the superior general of the Sisters of the Immaculate Conception convinced my prioress to send me as secretary to a large meeting of superiors general of West Africa that was to be held in Ouagadougou. I therefore had to go out...and spend a whole week in the capital! In itself, the incident was trivial, but the novice who had just made profession in a cloistered monastery did not experience it as such.

Several months later, I was asked to go with an older sister to the Catholic Institute of West Africa in the Ivory Coast for a year of religious studies. This ended up lasting 4 years; my consolation was that in spite of the long absence from the monastery, I was allowed to make my solemn profession in January 1981!

*"Uphold me, O Lord, according to your promise and I shall live! And let me not be disappointed in my hope."*

I welcomed with all my heart the name Theophorus, proposed to me as a motto, because it corresponded to my deepest aspiration: Wêndbala, which translated means "God alone". It was very demanding, but I received it without pretention, hoping against hope, because *"The love of God was shed abroad in my heart by the Holy Spirit,"* free gift of Him *"who works within us, inspiring both the will and the deed."*

And it was in July 1991 that I was elected Prioress. It was difficult for me and for the community to replace Mother Marie Hamel, our foundress and first French Prioress: a remarkable woman of holy life, she had received all of us into this Benedictine monastic life and was for each of us a loved and venerated mother. Beginning at this time, my great capacity for trust was to be put to the test! My desire to be more and more attached to Jesus was there, very real...but how could I be at the head of a community? And even more, how could I succeed the foundress? My inner acceptance of this charge of prioress was difficult, but it came to me as a gift about 4 years later, during a retreat. At that time I welcomed the path which the Lord and my sisters presented to me and I committed myself to it resolutely. *"Suscipe me, Domine... et non confundas me..."* The chant of my offering resounded in the deepest part of my being, and somewhere I felt myself sustained in my hope: *"The God who calls you is faithful: it is He who will act."* 1 Thess. 5:24. And then, *"Hope does not disappoint, because the Love of God has been shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit which has been given to us."* Rom. 5:5.

One of my first difficulties was finding myself confronted with different temperaments, and still more difficult, with sensibilities different from mine regarding the interpretation of the vows in practical terms: obedience, willingness to be of service... But St. Benedict warns the Abbot! RB 2... The first time that one of my sisters said no to a request that I presented her in obedience, I was very shaken. I looked at myself as I had been ten years earlier! When I was asked to leave the monastery to study, even though I cried my heart out, I would never have said no to my prioress.

Our venerated Mother Marie died in 1998, seven years after my election: a grain that fell and was buried in the earth of Koubri, seed of Hope for her community, as well as for the people of Burkina Faso for whom she had given her life, for the Church and for the world.

Then followed two or three particularly difficult years... Was it due to the shock of the disappearance of our first prioress and foundress? Was it because several sisters in the community were around 40 years old? ... In any case, it was a time of crisis for the community and the prioress. But it was then that I experienced the extent to which the Lord was close, always at our side. It was He, the Master who steered the boat! Even in the midst of this storm, when we had the impression that He was sleeping in the back on a cushion, He was keeping watch, Israel's Guard! Cf. Ps 120.

I began to understand better that my conversion, as well as that of my sisters, was first of all His work before it was mine. If grace does not touch the heart, exhortations and advice are useless. I had to learn to turn everything over to the Holy Spirit and not to take myself too seriously. To spend my time worrying, becoming agitated, was to wave my arms and spoil the work of love of this Spirit shed abroad in our hearts. Trust and Hope! "God sees the community of tomorrow," said Brother Francis to Tancred, who had urged him to react energetically to the bad conduct of certain brothers who seemed to be compromising the future of the still adolescent Franciscan Order. Cf. *Sagesse d'un Pauvre*, El. Leclerc.

Yes, it is the Lord who will create the future of the community which belongs to him and which he himself forms! This is the reason for my Hope.

Our economic worries, although not overwhelming, were real... Like all communities no doubt, we were not able to survive on the resources generated by our members. Our foundresses had had the ingenuity to look for and find the best and most reliable way of earning their living when they arrived in Burkina Faso: making and selling yoghurt. But we had to face all of the obstacles and vicissitudes linked to this sort of activity, from unexpected turns of the market to the unfortunate surprises of bankrupt or dishonest clients, collaborators who were suddenly false friends, not to mention the demands of the suppliers... "If the Lord does not build the house, the builders labor in vain!" For the most part, we came out on top, borne by our child-like trust.

And today... as the years pass, I become more and more conscious of the fact that God is God! I look back in surprise at my almost 19 years as prioress! Surprise... how could we have crossed these floods and these waves... and the tossing of deep waters!

*"Hope does not disappoint, because Love has been spread abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who has been given to us." Rom. 5:5*

Love, Forgiveness, Beginning Again, Moving Forward...Patience... are they not other names for Hope?

When I see young people who hear the call and decide to respond with fervor, this fills me with joy and nourishes my hope. When, after a period of discernment, my community accepts that one or another of its members be sent for formation outside the monastery, I think that we are placing Hope in tomorrow's community. And when we consent to welcome sisters from other monasteries in West Africa or elsewhere, or when we respond to a call for help by sending one of our sisters to another monastery, we see Hope and make it grow. A community that receives and sends, a community that is open to others is, it seems to me, a witness to Hope... A comforting sign that the Lord is there at work in us, in spite of our limitations, and also with us...with all of our goodwill as well as the human and spiritual resources which he has entrusted to us and which we must put to good use.

Since the beginning of my charge as prioress, I have attached a great deal of importance to spiritual direction and interpersonal relationships: I saw and still see there a place of welcome and mutual comfort, even when dialogue is difficult! Because God is always there, present in each heart and between us, source of our Hope. The short prayer that opens our meetings recalls and underscores this. To listen, allowing my sister to say what is in her heart, hearing news of her family, talking about questions involving work, etc., is also a way of trying to discern the will of God and the signs that He never ceases to give us in our very ordinary everyday lives. Here also we see evidence of Hope. When Lent arrives, I am always moved by the “Lenten notes” of my sisters! Short or long, the care with which each note is written conveys each sister's desire of conversion and expresses her humble, sincere and loving prayer. I have always imagined the joy of the Lord as he welcomes the offerings of his beloved. Hope in our hearts...

*“Never despair of the mercy of God.” RB 4*

When I began to reflect on the theme of this exchange – we were then in Zadar – I learned of the catastrophic floods that were to destroy several areas of the city of Ouagadougou in Burkina Faso: in one day thousands of families became homeless, without resources or official documents. What hope could sustain so many suffering people! The large movement of solidarity and generosity that arose in so many hearts in the face of their suffering brothers and sisters lifted up their hearts.

At the beginning of January, it was Port-au-Prince, the capital of Haiti, that wept and groaned, incapable of counting its dead, still less of burying them. This earthquake, like all natural catastrophes, challenges our Hope! Only eyes lifted toward the Cross of Jesus, silent prayer supporting efforts and all gestures of charity, can answer the different questions that arise in the face of such pain.

*Never despair of the mercy of God...* It is the great breath of Hope that traverses the whole Rule of St, Benedict from one end to the other, from the initial invitation to listen to the “loving Father” to the final exhortation that opens to the beyond: “You shall arrive!” It is also the powerful élan of Love underlying the whole New Testament: “and the Word became flesh...and dwelt among us!” And “Who can separate us from the Love of Christ? I am certain: neither death nor life...nothing can separate us from the Love of God manifested in Jesus Christ,” the Ever-Living One, God-with-us forever...