

My Vocation Story

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A vocation is a gift from God. It is nurtured and developed through many encounters which are part of a larger plan of God. The description here focuses on the most important instances to understand how – after a conversion in an Protestant context – I became a Catholic missionary priest in South Sudan.

*I have been reminded of your sincere faith, which first lived in your grandmother...
(2 Tim 1:5)*

I grew up in a family where not my parents, but my paternal grandparents were practicing Catholics. It was the custom in their house to pray before dining, and we grandchildren learned about the importance of Sunday Mass as a fixed ritual of the week. During childhood, I had an unquestioned faith in the presence of God and Jesus in my life. I also decided to become an acolyte (altar servant) as a teenager and discovered that I was one of very few students in my school who attended Sunday prayer. I really liked it. Unfortunately, faith did not appear as something relevant during the week. In my parents' home or in company with my friends, issues of religion and the practical consequences of being a believer were not talked about. My grandparents lived quite far away. Because my childhood-faith in God, though genuine, was not being nurtured adequately, I guess that I would have become a secular person without ever grasping the core of the Gospel, as happens to many church youth in my country when they become adults. My direction changed when my father proposed to send me to the USA as an exchange student at the age of 17.

*You have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through
faith in Christ Jesus. (2 Tim 3:15)*

By chance I applied for a year abroad with an ecumenical Christian organization, Young-Life, that placed me with a warm-hearted Protestant family. They belonged to the conservative spectrum with a genuine love for Jesus Christ and the Bible. Their Brethren Church had an active youth ministry and, together with the Young-Life youth program, it opened a new world for me of what it means to be and live as a Christian. There, I started to read the Bible on my own for the first time. It caught my interest unexpectedly and touched me so deeply that I surrendered my life to God. I can describe it best as a transition from a self-centered to a Christ-centered perspective. With the word "self-centered" I don't imply that I had been a selfish person. It just describes how people usually keep control of the different sectors in their life (family, friends, job, money, etc.). God or faith issues might be an additional sector, but at the centre, oneself demands to be autonomous and to remain in charge of how much God is allowed to interfere. By becoming Christ-centred, I let God take over all sectors of my life to sanctify it. Instead of sitting in the driver's seat of my life and asking the "passenger Jesus" for advice, I switched seats and let Jesus drive.

The saving encounter with Jesus liberates our hearts to follow him. The opposite is being trapped in one's fears or desires. Scripture describes this transition with an impressive confession: God "*delivered us from the power of darkness and transferred us to the Kingdom of his beloved Son.*" (Col 1:13) He reconciled the world to himself through Christ (2 Cor 5:18), It is God's unmerited gift, received by faith. After this experience of God's compassion for me, I could not continue living with reservations or withhold anything from Him. There is a verse of the apostle Paul that summarizes my faith-experience: "*I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.*" (Gal 2:20) Although my turning towards Christ happened in a Protestant environment, it is a profound Catholic experience. All the saints in history had a personal conversion to and devotion for Christ.

After returning home, I had an identity crisis because my faith-experience was so different from the secular lives of many Catholics. Before my year abroad, I was connected to the parish but did not understand Christ. After, I was devoted to Christ but did not feel at home at church. Personal conversion and evangelization was not preached. During that period, my paternal grandmother played a crucial role. As a young woman, she had converted from the Lutheran to the Catholic Church and was well informed about matters of faith. She was a competent companion, helping me to bring Jesus Christ, the Holy Scripture and the Catholic Church together. It is the continuous family of God through history, the Church, which keeps the faith alive and passes it on to the next generation. In every generation, not all respond in the same way to the call of Christ.

In order to have closer fellowship with other believers, I founded a Bible-study group in Berlin. We were high school and college students – Catholic, Lutheran, Charismatic and Evangelical Christians. The friendships in the Lord with several of these group members have remained and give me strength to be a missionary. The “social network” in the Holy Spirit, where we pray for each other, is truly a strong foundation.

The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners... (Lk 4:18)

When I finished high school, Germany still had the military draft. I chose to be a conscientious objector because I did not want to learn to use weapons or be violent in any way. The state accepted that decision on condition that the person engaged in community service at an accredited institution instead. At the French monastery of Taizé, I met a young man who had done his social service as a lay missionary through the Catholic Church in Peru. It was a partnership between a parish in the south of Germany and the diocese of Chachapoyas in the north of Peru. There, for the first time, I got to know the Church as the pilgrim people of God. In our joys and sorrows we are not just individual believers but walk together as a community with faith and hope. This experience helped me to identify as a Catholic, not only to know that the Church sustains us, but to live it among the poor and marginalized.

The parish priest preached at Christmas that Jesus desires to be born in a person's heart. His birth is not just an event which happened 2000 years ago. The presence of Jesus brings God's light into our darkness. I knew it was the same Jesus to whom I had opened my life in the USA who spoke to me again. Because of my ecumenical (inter-denominational) life-story, part of my missionary work is to bring together believers of all churches.

I was engaged in different ways as a lay missionary. The people suffered in the 1990s from terrorism of the *Sendero Luminoso* and counter-terrorism measures by the Peruvian government that killed and imprisoned thousands of innocent citizens. The diocese I worked at reacted to this situation by founding a human rights commission to inform the people about their rights, to strengthen local faith communities and also to offer legal assistance in case of arbitrary detention. As a member of this commission, I visited the local prison almost daily and organized courses for the rural, predominantly illiterate, population.

In the parish, I coordinated the youth work for those who had received the sacrament of first communion but not yet old enough to join the preparation of confirmation. In many parishes in Peru, it was common that parents went to church groups at the same time as their children were being prepared for the sacraments to discuss the same topics and to share the faith at home among family members. The program is called “catechesis familiar”. My parish offered a solid formation in the faith for families and catechists which inspired me greatly. The parish priest also encouraged me to go on Saturday evenings to a chapel, one hour on foot outside of town, and pray the Liturgy of the Word as a catechist.

Looking back, my prayer service as a catechist finally developed into the desire to become a priest. During my stay in Peru, I also got to know several missionary orders of Catholic sisters. It made me

reflect on how I would like to live in a sharing Christian community. But at that time, I was sure that I would marry and become a family father.

***Who are they that fear the LORD? He will teach them the way that they should choose.
(Ps 25:12)***

Back in Germany, I decided to study theology with the idea of working as a lay person in a parish, which is quite common in Germany. My Old Testament lecturer was a Benedictine priest who fascinated me by his deep faith and spirituality so much that I asked if I might live in his monastery during my studies. There, I got into the habit of attending mass daily. The Eucharist, which makes present the crucified and risen Lord, is a channel of grace through which God speaks and touches our inmost being.

Pope Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi* n. 5

The presentation of the Gospel message is not an optional contribution for the Church. It is the duty incumbent on her by the command of the Lord Jesus, so that people can believe and be saved. This message is indeed necessary. It is unique. It cannot be replaced. It does not permit either indifference, syncretism or accommodation. It is a question of people's salvation. It is the beauty of the Revelation that it represents. It brings with it a wisdom that is not of this world. It is able to stir up by itself faith – faith that rests on the power of God. It is truth. It merits having the apostle consecrate to it all his time and all his energies, and to sacrifice for it, if necessary, his own life.

Soon after, it became clear that Jesus had called me to be a missionary priest. It was not a decision that I had to make, rather it was a discovery of what had already grown in my heart. The only question to answer was where I would join.

During the following holidays, I returned to Chachapoyas. Meanwhile, one of my friends from the parish had joined the postulancy of the Comboni Missionaries in Peru. He spoke about the founder St. Daniel Comboni and the charism of first evangelization, which means to work among peoples who do not yet know Jesus Christ or who are not yet sufficiently

evangelized. It just fit what I was searching for, and I did not inquire anywhere else. The Comboni Missionary dedicates his life for the mission through the evangelical vows and shares the life of the local people. The sharing of the Gospel is inspired by Jesus, who looked out for sinners and outcast (Lk 4:18-19; 19:9-10), and the prophets, who denounced injustice and oppression (Is 10:1-2; 58:6-12). During the 19th century, when Africa was ravaged by European colonialism and the Arab slave trade, Comboni spoke of his “brothers and sisters in Central Africa” who were, according to him, the “poorest and most abandoned” of all people and who deserved to know the compassionate face of God in Jesus Christ. That is why he founded missions in Sudan.

When, during my period of discernment, I heard about Comboni for the first time, I was meditating on the proclamation of St. James in defense of the poor: “*Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him?*” (Jas 2:5) As Jesus had given up his divine status in heaven in order to become a servant for the salvation of humanity (Mk 10:45; Phil 2:5-8), I was ready to leave my safety in Germany behind and follow his footsteps in the charism of Comboni.

After living for two weeks in a German Comboni community, I applied to enter the postulancy, the first step of formation. After the novitiate in Italy, I asked to be sent to Africa to understand better the passion of Comboni for the people of this continent. Since 2005, I have been living in East-Africa – first in Kenya and, since 2009, in South Sudan among semi-nomadic pastoralists (cattle-keepers). I was ordained priest in my hometown of Berlin in March 2011.

At that time gifts will be brought to the LORD of hosts from a people tall and smooth, from a people feared near and far, a nation mighty and conquering, whose land the river divides, to Mount Zion, the place of the name of the LORD of hosts. (Is 18:7)

The verse above speaks about the people in the Sudan. The “river” is the Nile which divides the territory. Isaiah foresaw the time when these people would bring gifts to the Lord in Zion. It did not happen during his time, but in Christian times. The African in Acts (Ch. 8), who gets baptized by Deacon Philip, was the first Sudanese Christian, even before the Gospel reached Europe. There was a long period of flourishing Christianity in the north of the Sudan, which vanished under Islamic influence, but it took until the end of the 20th century for the Nuer, the Nilotic people I live with, to become followers of Jesus in large numbers (though there were a few Nuer Christians from colonial times). The Nuer were displaced during the Sudanese civil war in the 2nd half of the 20th century and became Christians as refugees through contact with Catholic and Protestant missionaries in Khartoum and Ethiopia. During the struggle against their Islamic-fundamentalist government, which enslaved and killed countless non-Muslims, they discovered the God of the Bible as the Holy One who hears the cry of his suffering people like he heard the enslaved Israelites in Egypt. The Gospel spread among the Nuer like a fire in the 1980s and 1990s when the returning converts shared the faith with their relatives in the villages. The vision of Isaiah that the “people tall and smooth” of the Nile would worship God has also become true for them. Today, there are hundreds of thousands of Nuer Christians (mainly Presbyterians, Catholics and Episcopalians). One Catholic catechist reported that he had baptized over 20,000 converts during his years of service.

The Comboni Missionaries were invited by the bishop of Malakal Diocese in 1998 to serve those Catholics who live scattered in small villages of Fangak region in the Sudd, the wetlands of the Nile. In particular, we train catechists, women and youth to be competent prayer leaders and teachers of the faith in their chapels. Our parishioners have a strong, genuine faith in Jesus as their Savior, but little Christian formation. We also offer the catechumenate for adults who ask to become Christians. There are many followers of Nuer traditional religion who are drawn to Jesus Christ. Because over 95% of the population in this part of South Sudan is illiterate due to its isolation, we promote literacy programs in Nuer and English and manage one school in the parish center, the only institution in Fangak County where a student can complete primary school (8th grade). Furthermore, because of the current civil war, reconciliation among ethnic groups has become an important task of the churches in South Sudan.

I am grateful to witness that the Triune God is being worshipped in one of the most unlikely places on earth. Our young Catholic community, whose first generation of believers is still alive, is very hospitable and generous. We have just celebrated our 20th parish anniversary. In order to keep the parish together, we missionaries regularly visit our people in their villages. We always walk on foot because there are no roads and, therefore, no vehicles. The furthest chapels are between three and four days away from the parish centre. The territory that we have to cover (Fangak County) is 7600 square kilometers large, about 8 times the size of Berlin, Germany’s capital. Paths that are not used disappear within a few weeks in the ever-growing vegetation. Our “highway” is the river. For half of the year, the high waters of the Nile and the rains flood the region which is flat like a disc. There are no hills, except termite hills. On our journeys, we cross waters that sometimes reach up to the neck. Tropical diseases are common and safe drinking water is rare. The basic diet is sorghum with milk or with fish.

The Nuer plant and harvest with hand tools as the ox-plough has not yet been introduced to this region. Furthermore, there is no postal service, no phone network nor a power grid. If it makes sense at all to speak of the “ends of the earth” on the spherical planet, I claim that the wetlands of the Nile are a good candidate. The isolation and simplicity of the life-style help me to focus on the essentials of what it means to be a human and a Christian.

I am grateful for the entire way that God has led me so far and don’t want to change anything of what has shaped me – through His grace – into the person that I have become.

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