

The Northeastern Province of the School Sisters of Notre Dame 1970 – 1992 Kay O'Connell, SSND, 2005

Evacuation of Liberia

Liberia was a country that had had peace for over a hundred years among the 16 different tribes, and with ethnic groups like the Muslim Mandingos who had emigrated over the years. The inter-tribal warfare let loose by the conflict was another particularly tragic aspect of the conflict for sisters who had ministered there. This was partly because the Krahn, who lived in the area of Tchien, were deeply involved both as persecutors and persecuted, and because the sisters had always experienced the Liberian people as peace loving, very generous and deeply religious. The savagery aroused by the war reminded them of a prescient remark made at the beginning of the conflict by a native of Tchien, "I fear what will happen once we've tasted blood."

Massacre and Departure from Monrovia

Another profound tragedy was the murderous assault carried out in Monrovia at the Lutheran Hospital compound on July 30, 1990 against 600 women and children who had taken refuge there. This was done by government (Doe's) soldiers who seem to have run amok in the face of the threat from the rebel forces who were very close to Monrovia at the time. During the massacre, they shot or bayoneted everyone.

Sisters Laurellen and Mary Peter were at the Arthur Barclay campus a few streets away from Lutheran at the time that this happened. They were then living with three Bernardine sisters in Sinkor, next door to Arthur Barclay Business College (as it was now called). They left our convent on Tubman Boulevard since it had already been shelled. It was directly in the line of fire up to the executive mansion, which Taylor was trying to capture. Marguerite had chosen to remain there to continue her pastoral work.

Laurellen and Peter spent every day in the ABBC compound, which had become a refugee camp during July when classes had ceased. They spent their time distributing rice, entertaining the children, caring for the sick, and doing all they could to protect the people. On the evening of the massacre mentioned above, Doe's soldiers had come first to the gate at Arthur Barclay demanding vehicles, and had been successfully sent away. Three Salesian priests who were present pleaded with them to leave, and demanded that they respect the Red Cross flag flying above the gate.

The slaughter at the Lutheran compound convinced the sisters and priests at ABBC that they had to disperse the people since there was now no safety for them in groups. So they distributed to them all the available rice and sent them away. It seemed safer for the people to walk the streets alone or in small groups than to stay in the enclosed ABBC property.

The two sisters also realized that it was now time for them to leave the country, since there was no more they could do for the people. During this time, Marguerite Bunter had been continuing her parish work in the neighborhood, protecting people and distributing rice as long as she could. She was reunited with Laurellen and Peter at the beach house of the SMAs where they had gone after leaving ABBC. At this time the sisters could see helicopters leaving from the American Embassy, but it was too late for them to get to that part of Monrovia. They had been offered evacuation by the Embassy as early as the previous March but had wanted to stay with their people as long as they could. Later they were glad that they had not been evacuated by air, because then they would not have been able to see first hand the devastation of the country.

Mary Peter, Marguerite and Laurellen fled Liberia in a convoy of cars, holding about 75 people, heading north for the border of Ivory Coast on August 11, 1990. The convoy left from Catholic Hospital with all the patients who were being evacuated to Phoebe Hospital about six hours away. Taylor's soldiers intended to make Catholic Hospital their headquarters. Each sister held a small child. Marguerite remembers giving the tiny one on her lap a little taste of peppermint candy to quiet him as they drove along. This convoy was escorted and protected by the NPFL (Taylor's) troops who eventually at one checkpoint commandeered all the cars and put the refugees on a bus. When they reached Gbarnga, Bishop Sekey put the sisters up for the night and brought them a can of chicken about 11 o'clock. It was the first food they had had all day.

Everywhere alongside the road they saw dead bodies and destroyed, devastated, empty villages. On the last leg of the journey at night over the Cavalla River to reach Man in the Ivory Coast, they rode at high speed for an hour, shivering in open trucks. The trucks were courtesy of MSF, Doctors without Borders. The sisters remember how strange it was to feel cold in Liberia. At the police station in Man, they were told that all the sisters and priests were to go to Catholic mission where the Bishop of Man had arranged hospitality for them in a lovely retreat house. From here they took a bus ten hours to Abidjan, the capital, where they were joyfully reunited with Loreen and Leonora, at CAM, a missionaries' hostel. These two had their own story about leaving Liberia to tell. The five SSNDs flew to Spain and then New York, arriving on August 17 and 18, 1990. Only when they saw so many sisters and family members gathered at JFK to welcome them did they fully realize the danger in which they had been.

Tragic End in Tchien

In Tchien the sisters had closed the schools very reluctantly in April 1990. Around this time, Leonora had left Cape Palmas and gone up to Zwedru because it became impossible for her to carry on her work in education. For months the sisters in Tchien had tried to carry on normally. The area was surrounded by government (Doe's) troops, but there was great tension as the men were undisciplined and violent, and all knew that a slaughter of the Krahn by the Gio and Mano tribes would come when Taylor finally took Zwedru.

After weeks of declining enrollment, the sisters realized that they were endangering their students and the people by carrying on as usual. Up to that time, they had believed they were giving people a sense of security. Loreen realized that the government troops might at any time just take her class of 50 boys for soldiers. Peter decided to close the girl's house on Palm Sunday, April 8, knowing that the girls there were in danger of being taken for the soldiers' pleasure. The sisters sensed that parents were afraid to say so, but wanted to take their children back into the bush for safety. The principals of the schools, being Liberians, could not stop classes without being considered traitorous to the Doe government, which insisted over the radio that all was well and that Doe was in complete charge of the country.

Mary Peter went to Monrovia around this time for supplies for the mission and was unable to return. Not long afterwards, Leonora and Loreen left Tchien in a caravan of vehicles filled with fleeing people and arrived at the relative safety of Cape Palmas. They remained there helping Bernardine Sister Sponsa make evacuation plans for 25 crippled children for whom she was responsible. Sister Loreen had the BJHS record cards with her; she and Martha Weah brought them up to date, so it could be known who had graduated from the school. She also helped to update the science lab at Our Lady of Fatima High School. Gradually both sisters realized that their presence was all they could offer the people.

In late July 1990, Loreen was slated to go to Nigeria for the SSND Assembly. She left Leonora in Cape Palmas very reluctantly, fearing that the Liberian border would be closed when she tried to return. When this turned out to be a realistic fear, she headed for Abidjan, Ivory Coast, as they had agreed.

Leonora left Cape Palmas, probably on August 11, with Martha Weah, a former SSND postulant who was a nurse, and two Bernardine sisters, one named Miriam George. Leonora had heard on the mission radio that all the missionaries in Monrovia were leaving as a group and she knew she had to be on the plane to the US with them. They were on the road five and half hours, arguing over bribes with soldiers at various checkpoints along the way. At the Cavalla River, the border between Liberia and Ivory Coast, Leonora gave her last \$20 to a young boy who ferried them across the swift and dangerous currents of this river. The ferry was "half a canoe" attached to a wire by which he pulled them across. They abandoned their car on the Liberian side.

Leonora had no documentation when she entered Ivory Coast; in Cape Palmas there had been no functioning government to give her papers. She spent hours waiting at the border until a sympathetic official finally let her through. In San Pedro, she was very joyfully and tearfully reunited with Loreen, and later in Abidjan with Peter, Marguerite and Laurellen. On August 15, in the Cathedral in Abidjan, 30 missionary refugees of all communities gathered for a liturgy of thanksgiving for their own safety and to pray for their people. Then the five SSNDs flew to JFK in New York.

And so ended tragically the 20 years of Wilton's ministry in Liberia. (Three sisters returned to Liberia in 1992 intending to remain there, but left for Ghana on Bishop Dalieh's advice because of tragic circumstances that will be described later in this account.) In Zwedru a new building, which was to be used exclusively for the education of women in home economics and business and named for Mother Theresa, was very near completion when the sisters fled. It had been built by the hard physical labor of Sister Mary Peter and the students who dug sand to make concrete and collected pebbles and rocks for the foundation. It was to be opened in late 1990.

Wilton Provincial Barbara Valuckas and Councilor Virginia Muller, on their way to the Fifth African Assembly in Nigeria, had been asked to dedicate this building. This never took place; instead all the buildings in Tchien have been looted, shelled and destroyed, with perhaps the exception of the convent which became headquarters for the rebel soldiers. A picture of Bishop Dalieh still hangs on a wall inside the front door there, a signal to him that the building remains church property.

A Sad Visit

In early 1991, a ceasefire was in effect, and Amos Sawyer, a former university professor and director of the Association for Constitutional Democracy in Liberia, was trying to act as interim president in Monrovia. From January to April, Leonora returned to Liberia; she was able to take pictures of the appalling damage to our missions. On this trip she encountered many people who were heartbroken, searching for their disappeared loved ones. She herself found some dear friends from Tchien and heard of the deaths of many others.

The following October, at the invitation of Bishop Dalieh, Leonora, with other missionaries, returned to attend a planning session for workshops by which the three bishops were hoping to initiate a gradual process of reconciliation and healing. "It was a wonderful opportunity to be part of planning for the future—the new Liberia. In the midst of death, destruction and armed troops, there was still hope," she wrote to the province.

Permission to Return

On April 25, 1992, Sisters Barbara Valuckas and Virginia Muller met with the returned missionaries at the provincial house. At the end of this day of discernment, Leonora, Marguerite, Laurellen and Kathleen expressed a desire to return to Liberia and were given permission. This decision came after months of prayer and consideration while the sisters were performing other ministries. They realized at this time that conditions in Liberia were not stable or predictable, but they wanted to assist in the healing process and to try to reestablish the educational system in this devastated country.

The returning missionaries spent the next few months gathering enough clothing, books and school supplies to fill a 20-foot shipping container, much of it collected from

our SSND elementary schools on Long Island. The Wilton Rotary Club worked very hard with Leonora on packing and transporting that container to the dock in Brooklyn. At a Rotary-sponsored crafts show, they also raised \$2000 toward the \$6000 cost of shipping the container and encouraged other local groups and corporations to contribute.

Three of the four missionaries, Leonora, Kathleen and Marguerite, set foot in Cape Palmas on October 9, 1992. Laurellen was prevented from returning at this time by her need for another hip operation. The returning sisters received a very warm welcome from Bishop Dalieh and the other missionaries. Kathleen noted, "We knew only a few people from Zwedru, and everyone seemed to show scars of this terrible war." They did not fully realize yet that the civil war was just then seriously re-escalating around Monrovia.

Six days later, Bishop Dalieh asked the sisters to return to Abidjan, Ivory Coast, to lay claim to the container they had sent ahead of them. It had arrived and he was being charged duty on it. Kathleen had already been asked to begin to straighten out the library at Our Lady of Fatima High School, where she found to her surprise that Mr. Reeves was now principal. She remembers, "It was hard to know what to say; so much had happened since I had last seen him."

Initially Kathleen did not think she needed to go back to Ivory Coast with the others. She felt that Marguerite who spoke French fluently, and Leonora whose name was on the bill of lading, would be well able to handle the task. However, unwilling to separate in the uncertain circumstances, they persuaded her to go with them. Two weeks of frustrating visits to office after office to get papers signed for customs, taxes, and storage fees followed before the container was finally released and put on a truck.

Murder of ASC Friends

When they returned to Cape Palmas, Bishop Dalieh, very sad and upset, told them of the deaths of five sisters, Adorers of the Blood of Christ in Gardnersville, outside Monrovia, about ten days before. On October 20, Barbara Ann Muttra and Mary Joel Kolmer had given a ride home to a security guard at the convent so they could give medical attention to his sick child. On the way back, they picked up two ECOMOG soldiers. Taylor's soldiers ambushed them and killed everyone in the car. When they did not appear at the convent in Gardnersville that night, the three sisters there feared the worst, but the fighting between Doe's forces and the ECOMOG soldiers was so intense that it prevented a search party from going out.

According to an eyewitness, on October 23, Taylor's rebel soldiers came to the convent and, ordering the sisters out of the house, demanded the keys to the car. Sister Kathleen Maguireⁱ handed them over and was immediately shot. Then Sisters Shirley Kolmer and Agnes Mueller were shot at point blank range when they could not produce American money. Both sisters begged for their lives but it seemed that the soldiers had their orders. All three bodies were left in the yard in front of the convent. It

is reported that after these terrible events, even the rebel soldiers felt that “a line had been crossed” in the conduct of the war, a line that was profoundly shocking to everyone.

Hundreds of people gathered to mourn the sisters at a Mass at Sacred Heart Cathedral in Monrovia on November 1, at which Bishop Michael Francis appealed to the American charge d'affaire to get safe conduct from Taylor in order to recover their bodies. Taylor, at this time, was still denying that his forces were responsible, claiming that they did not control the area in which the nuns were killed. Finally, in early December, Father Michael Moran, SMA, was one of the priests and diplomats who “felt it was an honor” to go to the convent in Gardnersville to recover the sisters’ bodies. The three caskets were placed on a US Air Force plane and flown to Dover, Delaware on December 6. It was another few months before the bodies of Barbara and Joel were recovered from the road and sent to the ASC motherhouse in Ruma, Illinois, where all five martyrs are now buried.

Many Memories

Sister Kathleen McGuire had been in Liberia a year, returned to the States for a short break in summer 1992, and was back in Liberia for about three months before her death. The other four “Adorers” had fled Liberia in 1990, along with our sisters, but had “badgered” their superiors to let them return in August 1991. That flight was only one of the many experiences they had shared with SSND. Barbara Ann, Shirley, Joel and Agnes had been close friends of our sisters for many years. Laurellen remembers meeting Joel and Shirley at the Cathedral in Abidjan, on August 15, 1990, and hearing how they had walked from Gardnersville to Kakata (at least 30 miles) before getting transportation to the Ivory Coast.

In 1974, Barbara had sat up late at night with Rose Curtin on the freighter, speaking of her love for the Liberian people. She had later saved Petronilla’s life when she was gravely ill with hepatitis by hitching up an IV to a ladder in the convent in Tchien. Barbara had taken Dr. Denise McGowan up country to her clinic in Kley, away from Doe’s corrupt government when the ministry of health was demanding a \$1000 fee (dash) because “she was practicing medicine without permission.” Barbara was deeply loved by people and missionaries alike. In all the danger she had faced in Liberia, she had seemed to live with the conviction that she would not be hurt. But the rebels had detained her overnight, the August previous to her death, and this had seemed to shake her confidence somewhat. One of Taylor’s rebels, had said of her, “That old ma is full of rice,” a very high compliment in Liberian patois.

Sister Shirley had an apartment in Monrovia when she was teaching at the University of Liberia, and had often given hospitality to our sisters before we had a convent in the city. They remember fondly her relaxed housekeeping practices and her wonderful hospitality and sense of humor. When Kathleen Wahl had a broken arm from an auto accident, it was Shirley who had held the x-ray plate at the hospital and “made a lot of noise” so that she’d get the care she needed.

Bishop Michael Francis wrote this in 1993:

These five angels of peace came to our country to minister to our people, to heal our wounds, to educate our people, and to bring to our people a fuller, fruitful and spiritual life. They died because they loved us.

When Marguerite, Leonora and Kathleen had been told by Bishop Dalieh that the missing ASCs were dead, Kathleen remembers that “we just sat together and cried and tried to support one another.” The Bishop then told them that they would have to leave the country as some Americans had been taken hostage. He asked them to stagger their exit with those of other missionaries “so it wouldn’t seem as if we were all rushing out.”

Joyful First Profession in Ghana

The sisters had already planned to go to Sunyani, Ghana, on November 9, to be present at the first profession of three native African SSNDs. Now they pushed up their departure date to November 5, and with heavy hearts spent the next few days saying their good-byes and re-packing their bags. Father Quiah, a Liberian priest, accompanied them to the border of Ivory Coast. They had no trouble crossing the river this time. “In fact,” Kathleen wrote afterwards, “The rebel commander expressed his sorrow at our leaving.”

Via Abidjan and Accra, by bus, the heavy-hearted missionaries arrived in Sunyani a few days later to a warm welcome from Sisters Petronilla, Antoinette Nauman, Mary Busson and the eight novices. “It was only when they saw our faces and our luggage that they realized we were here for more than three days,” Kathleen wrote, and later she added this:

On November 14, we were privileged to be present for the first West African profession ceremony. This historical and truly African event left a lasting impression on everyone. We know the continuity of our mission here depends so much on God’s call to the indigenous young women. It was very moving to witness the hymns in dialect, the African dance and the solemn moment of vow taking when SSND embraced another continent. We pray that this new seed grows like the mustard seed.
