

Dear Friends of Africa,

Nov. 1st, 2021

As the calendar edges towards November, at this time of writing I reflect on my consternation in the same month back in 1953. At the time I was one of 7 novices at St. Paul's Abbey in Newton, New Jersey. The longer I lived the monastic life, the more I felt drawn to a more rigorous following of St. Benedict's Rule as was the practice of the Trappists. After reading Thomas Merton's, "Seven Storey Mountain", the yearning for a purely monastic life became ever stronger. I had gone to our abbot twice, and each time he felt my yearning for a strict monastic way of life was presumptuous. On my third request for a talk with him he finally relented and said that he would himself take me to a Trappist monastery where a good friend of his was the abbot. That same afternoon, as I was entering the chapel for evening prayers, the thought came to me like a revelation--why was I pushing so much for a monastic life when I could just as well have it right there where I was? The fact that we were missionary Benedictines was also part of my dilemma. Then and there I decided to leave the whole issue up to God. If He wanted me to be a monk, then I could just as well stay at St. Paul's Abbey, and if the Lord wanted me to go to the missions, then that too I'd leave it up to providence.

However, I also included a personal proviso that if I were sent to the missions, I would go under obedience but would not volunteer. After evening prayers, I went to the abbot again and told him that I had now decided to stay. He told me that he would have to confer with the prior of the monastery since I had already come on three occasions to leave the monastery. After his conference with the prior, they decided that I would have to remain as a novice for six more months, however, the six was reduced to two, and in November of 1953, I made my simple profession of three years. I had to hit the books to catch up with my classmates who were already a couple months ahead of me in the philosophy courses, but my mind was at ease without any more doubts about monastic life and the foreign missions. I left it all completely in the lap and love of God and the decision of my superiors. In 1958, I was sent to Germany to acquaint myself with the German part of our Benedictine congregation and their missionary endeavors in Africa, Asia and South America. In July of 1958, while I was still in Germany, I received a letter from my abbot, Charles Coriston, of St. Paul's Abbey in Newton, New Jersey, informing me that I would report for my mission assignment in Tanganyika in November of that year.

My first assignment was to build a minor seminary, basically a secondary school for boys, to prepare those who showed interest in becoming priests. I was teaching English and Latin to the first year class of some 30 boys who had completed eight years of primary education. One day I had given an English homework exercise to write an essay in English, the topic being on why they wanted to become a priest. The highest marks were given to the boys with the best grammar and spelling and their reasons for wanting to become a priest. These varied, and were frankly put, like the boy who spoke of his desire, "so that I can ride a motorcycle"—a very candid and unabashed reason for a 12 year old African boy. Father Anthony Ashcroft, also a monk from St. Paul's Abbey in Newton, New Jersey, was rector of the seminary at that time and I was his assistant. We would alternate weekly eating with the young boys mainly to ensure they were getting sufficient and nourishing meals. Usually the meal consisted of corn meal mush and a side dish of vegetables, mostly some sort of beans or other

legumes. One evening, I found little dark specks floating on the top of the bowl of beans. I assumed it was black pepper and spread it over the portion of rice. A little boy came to my table and started picking the black specks off and putting them aside. He commented, when I told him I really liked the pepper, "we do too, but these are weevils". Another night I was awakened by the dogs barking and went into the dormitory compound to check out the disturbance. The dogs were gathered at the dining hall which was an open air structure, and as I shined my flashlight, I found a full-sized leopard traipsing down the whole length of the hall on the dining room tables taking great care to not disturb any of the aluminum bowls or spoons left neatly by the soundly sleeping boys. He stopped at the end of the row of tables he was on, turned, looking at me with great composure through brilliant yellow eyes, then leapt to the top of the school enclosure wall and disappeared into the night. When the boys came for breakfast in the morning, I saw some of them tracing with their fingers the leopard paw prints where the claw marks were visible, not saying a word, with wide-eyed questioning looks on their faces. I can suppose some were speculating as to how safe and secure they were in their screened-in dormitories. The windows were secured with metal bars but that did not dispel the anxiety of little African boys, who heard endless tales of real and ghost stories of the animals of the night. Within a month of this nighttime leopard visit, a young village girl was taken by a lion on her way to early morning Sunday Mass. Only her bloodied garments were left as a memento from the encounter. Even today, I can recall the special drum beat calling for the able-bodied men to come for the task of dealing with a marauding lion or lions. Somehow it was assumed that the padre had the inside information of wild animal behavior and was able to protect the welfare of the community, so I always attended when I heard that special drum beat.

On one such occasion, when the drums had not even completed the call for assembly of all able-bodied men to come for the welfare of the village, I had an urgent message from the village headman. His cook and house boy were at my door holding the chief's shotgun and handed it to me conveying that I should take his gun for the duty at hand since the chief had an urgent call to attend a special meeting at the district headquarters, and thus would be unable to participate in efforts to dispatch the lions. This time there were four in the pride. We waited in vain for the arrival of the game scouts whom we'd alerted of our plight. The whole village was under lockdown and the elders decided we would deal with the problem as we had always done in the past. The local hunters managed to dispatch one lion with their trusty bows and arrows, and I one with my borrowed shotgun. The two remaining lions fled back to the safety of their home in the Rondo Forest. Our village leader arrived late in the afternoon with four game scouts and took possession of the two dead lions, since they were considered government property, and draped the dead carcasses on top of their Landrover, parading them through the village to assure the people of our village of Rutamba that they were again safe. Here in Lushoto however, though we are within the forest area of Magamba, we rarely see or hear of the wildlife that once called it home.

Again, we wish to thank you for your wonderful generosity in keeping our school doors open and our children well attended to in their classrooms.

Sincerely, and the Good Lords blessings on you all, Father Damian