

## Mission in Burkina Faso

### *Reflections from an Asian missionary*

Sister Maureen Catabian from the Province of Philippines has held many roles at province, regional and international levels, with particular focus on work for Justice. In 2016 Maureen was invited to move to Senegal to work in the area of initial formation. This was her first mission in a culture different from her own, after 25 years as Good Shepherd sister. After 5 months in Senegal, she realized the importance of her having experience of enculturation to the Francophone West African culture and context before commencing formation ministry. So, on 28 January 2017 Maureen moved to Burkina Faso where she is currently living. She shares with us her reflections upon life in Burkina Faso.



Sisters Emilie Ngom (Senegalese temporary professed sister) and Maureen Catabian.

## Life in Burkina Faso

Life in Burkina Faso is a diversity of colours. According to one article written by a Belgian artist/painter who migrated to *Ouagadougou*: 'The sky is not always the same in Burkina. Sometimes it is red orange, sometimes blue, pure white, powder blue, light pink, light yellow. It is always changing colors! In Belgium, she claims, the sky is always grey!'

The climate here too is kind of different.

Early mornings come with a cold breeze while mid-afternoons are feverishly hot with dusty winds blowing from the Sahara region. A Burkinabe shares that during the months of April the temperature goes to as high as 40 degrees centigrade! So at night, they would usually sleep outside their homes. The color of the earth is reddish brown while all you can see around the village is a flat, dry and dusty environment.





I remembered my last Retreat at HEAL (Haven for Ecological and Alternative Living) with the Medical Mission Sisters in Pangasinan, north of Manila where I mounted an '*Ode to Dryness*' using dried leaves and twigs. It is sad to say though that one can see 'used plastic bags' (in black color) thrown scattered around the village.

I could not figure out why with the scorching heat of the Sun, people would wear clothing which is long, wrapped around and multi-layered! They also like to wear 'wigs' to cover their real hair. The young people especially would like to wear their hair straight and colored either brown or brunette. They normally 'dress' their real hair with brightly printed textiles and accessorized with various trinkets!



Burkinabe people wear clothes fashionably! I see people wearing special clothes on ordinary days and also in the market. (In the Philippines during “Santacruzán” - Procession of the Holy Cross - a Spanish influenced religious ritual, Filipinos would don their best designed, glittering gowns ever!) You can just imagine how colourful it is here! Every day seems like a long religious procession!

I was very delighted to witness how they celebrated International Women’s Day (IWD) on March 8! The whole nation is in solidarity in the celebrations of women - in the streets, in the Church, the government on the local and national level, over the radio and television, various issues of women are being broadcast! They discussed issues of Human Trafficking, Forced marriages, Female Genital Mutilation, Domestic violence, Sexual abuse etc. The people do have a heightened consciousness in terms of political and socio-cultural issues.

On IWD, all women and men, young and old donned their clothes imprinted with “*Journée Internationale de la Femme*”. They celebrated with their attire, songs and dances! They literally celebrate cultural events with a strong sense of solidarity and festivity! During religious feasts in the Church, they likewise do the same. They wear clothes according to the Feast that is being celebrated like Christmas or Easter! They literally wear their Faith! I was happy to notice too that the Traffic enforcers here wear their uniforms in bright purple!



They do have strong faith devotions. They would pray prostrating and nearly kissing the earth. Here I experienced praying the 'Way of the Cross' with the entire village of the Christian faithful! The *Sanctuary of Our Lady of La Sallette* was jampacked with people. During a rosary procession, even the military were involved by playing the music band for Our Lady! The French colonial influence is very much present in Burkina Faso as the Cathedral is named after Our Lady of Lourdes.

Extreme poverty is very visible among the people. But in the midst of their situation of poverty it is their strong Faith and life of prayer that gives them hope to struggle every day of their lives. They truly 'hold on' to their Christian faith!

The ministries of Good Shepherd Sisters here are *Residence for Women and Children in Crises, Ministry to Women in Prison/Detention, Nursery/Day-Care School, Restaurant and Training Centre for Women*. On a weekly basis, I began integrating in the mission by visiting women in detention and spending time in the residence for young women in crises.

Community Life is so dynamic and challenging every day! We are an international community of 11 members belonging to 5 nationalities (Indian, Filipino, Senegalese, Burkinabe and Malian) and coming from all levels of formation: 3 perpetual vows, 3 temporary professed, 3 novices on their second year and 2 pre-postulants.



With a Convent/building complex with three floors and a big Chapel which is open to the public, the Sisters cannot be considered poor economically but in essence all the programs are dedicated to the poor families of marginalized women and children. The Restaurant '*Le Yelemani*' (meaning 'Transformation'), Training Center and School for children are connected to the Convent while the Residence for Women in Crises are in a separate location just a few meters away from the building complex.

Mobility is a must in Bobo Dioulasso. The Sisters' means of transportation is a motorbike, and a car. The community of sisters is working in collaboration with the Diocese, other religious congregations and the local government as well. We are actively part of the *Talitha Kum* which is a network fighting against human trafficking in Africa.

There is a Eudist community of 3 priests who celebrate Mass in our convent every Monday evening and Carmelite priests who come regularly on Fridays. On other days, we would go to three different Churches where the sisters take turns in animating the Lauds prayers together with the local people. Sometimes I would go to Mass or to the Market on a motorbike (only as a passenger though and not as a driver! I have yet to learn to drive the motorbike).

There are indeed many things to see, to risk, to share and to discover in mission. It is the Spirit that energizes us every day!



