



Photo: Jérémie Six

On the fiftieth anniversary of the encyclical "Populorum progressio", Catholics who have been deeply affected by their experiences as volunteers speak to "La Croix".

Claire Lesegetrain

Jérémie Six was in Togo from 2012 – 2014 with the Catholic Delegation for Cooperation (DCC) and the Assumptionists. In September 2106, he took his first vows as an Augustinian of the Assumption.

For a long time, I was trying to find myself, asking about the meaning of my life. Without a doubt, my two years as a volunteer in Africa helped me to discover who I am.

In Togo, a reality worlds away from France, I learned to know myself better. In retrospect, I think that the Lord was knocking at my door but I was afraid to let him in. I feel an affinity with the apostle Peter, who was a bit rough around the edges but also clear-cut and pure.

As a child, I was naughty: when I was 5, I climbed onto the roof of our house... As an adolescent, I was even more rebellious. As a university student, I was involved in three relationships, one after the other. I was even engaged to my second girlfriend. As for the third – well, it was very painful.

I had stopped attending mass. But during my first year as a math teacher, I began to attend Youth Mass at Saint-Maurice, in the center of Lille. I needed this to give me the strength to cope with my students, who were obnoxious and failing school. Strangely enough, the following year, it was with the class that had the worst reputation in the school that I was able to make the best connection.

However, I didn't see myself working in the same school for the rest of my career. Some friends of mine, who had been volunteers or had a gap year abroad, made me want go overseas as well. I needed to go far away, and lose myself in order to find myself.

So I made an application to the Catholic Delegation for Cooperation (DCC) in 2011 and completed three preparatory courses. In my list of preferences, I agreed to stay in a religious community.

This is how I came to depart for a year (that could be extended) to Sokodé in Togo. My mission was to help out in the St Augustine Cultural Center, particularly in the cybercafé and library, and to teach math at the high school run by the Augustinians of the Assumption.

At that time, I knew almost nothing about Assumptionists. In Sokodé, my host was the Master of Novices, and I stayed in the postulate, with two novices from the Congo, one from Madagascar and one from Cameroon.

I joined them for midday and evening prayers. In spite of our cultural differences, there was a real sense of brotherhood among the five of us.

Apart from my work in the Cultural Center and my math teaching, I also gave a lot of academic support in math to final years students. As I offered this tuition for free, I was very much in demand.

On the other hand, when the postulants asked me to help them with drafting their work in French, I felt less competent!

The Kotokoli ethnic group, which is mostly Muslim, lives in and around Sokodé. The religious dimension is everywhere, with a mosque every 200 meters. This ambiance, combined with communal life, lifted me onto the spiritual level.

So much so that, during my two years over there, a Congolese Assumptionist and I hosted a daily radio broadcast during which we would discuss "The Word of the Day". Since I was a small child, I have always loved Sunday homilies: now, I could listen to one every day and even give them!

In June 2013, with the spiritual accompaniment of the Master of Novices, I decided to extend my mission in Togo for another year. At no time did I have any sense that he was trying to draw me in; anyway, that would have made me turn and run!

That summer, while I was back in Lille for a few weeks, I confided to Archbishop Laurent Ulrich that I had found my vocation. In February 2014, when I asked to become a postulant, the Assumptionists in Sodoké were so happy that they gave me a little party!

When you become a volunteer, it's not all about efficiency and performance. I took this opportunity – and it is truly a great opportunity to volunteer in Africa – to rediscover the gift of human relationships.

With their mutual support, their natural faith and their welcoming of strangers, the people of Togo taught me about sincere and selfless relationships.

I later discovered that “selflessness, sincerity and open-heartedness” are the spiritual qualities that our founder, Father Emmanuel d’Alzon, wanted to give to his spiritual family.