Columns
Ministry



Manipur state, India (Unsplash/Unexplored Northeast)



by Frida Toppo

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August 19, 2020

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I am a native of Chhattisgarh, Eastern India. I had been teaching for a couple of years before I became a religious, inspired by the works of charity and the dedication of some diocesan priests and Sisters of Mercy of the Holy Cross in my native parish.

My ardent desire is to go to the people, and I was attracted to the Missionary Sisters of the Immaculate, whose charism is the living passion for proclaiming God's kingdom to all people.

Our convents are mostly situated in remote and rural areas, where we try to proclaim God's love through teaching, preaching, working in parishes and helping the needy. After classes, on Sunday, or holidays, our whole community goes for family visits — which are our top priority and major type of outreach — as the families face many problems, including poverty.

We participate in the life of people by visiting families in times of sorrow, sickness, death and misfortune. We share in their joys by our presence at celebrations for birthdays, marriages and feast days — and through sharing their traditional foods.

From the beginning of my ministry, I have wanted to go to the villages. It's my passion.

But for five years now, I have been having new experiences in my teaching ministry in Manipur, Northeast India, collaborating with the Jesuit priests of the Kohima region, in Bishnupur under the Imphal Archdiocese.

There are 18 villages far away from the parish, with houses scattered on the hills. They can't come to the parish to participate in Mass every Sunday. Though there are five Jesuits present, they can't reach out to every village on Sunday, so our mission superior and parish priest assigned 10 nuns to work in 10 different villages.

Every Sunday, we walk toward our assigned villages like the disciples walking to Emmaus. Most of us have to climb into the hills; one village takes me an hour and a half to reach. The journey of life has never been smooth, but always lightened by the marvelous love of God.

And after the long distance, it is a beautiful experience. When I reach there, they continue to sing the melodious sacred hymns they have sung as they waited. I conduct a prayer service, share a reflection based on the day's reading, and make note of their sacramental needs.

During Lent and Holy Week, I went to the village on Mondays and Thursdays, stayed overnight, conducted the Good Friday service and returned home on Saturday or Easter Sunday after holy Mass.

My encounter with families and children helps me to see the marvelous love of God in my life. It's amazing to see the generosity of people. They are simple and kind. They offer me a bed, share their food, and provide everything I need with love.

Every two months, we sisters and the priests meet to evaluate, share our experiences of success and failure, and discuss the problems of families and the villages. We also plan for upcoming parish events and programs.

The priests are encouraging and supportive.

Our mission superior told us, "You are doing wonderful work. You know every family by name and their status. I appreciate you."

Another priest commented: "We go for the holy Mass by the vehicle but your sisters walk for hours every Sunday. It is a great sacrifice."

This encouraged us to go ahead, and gave us the confidence to do more.

I have experienced miracles of God that I would like to share with joy.

In my village, there are mixed Christian denominations like Baptist, Church of North India, and Catholic. In January, there was a disagreement among the different denominations about the common land of the village. They fought right in front of me.

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Since it is a mixed group, some Catholics were supporting the other groups, and there was a dispute and misunderstanding among the Catholics. Many took personal offense and stopped coming to church.

It was a big challenge for the other Catholics, and even for me! Day by day, the number of participants in the church fell. It really hurt me since I was directly responsible for my village.

For a moment, I wondered what the Lord was asking of me. I'm a failure in my mission! But a ray of hope was still in me — I always believe the power of God is greater than the power of evil.

With the others who were still coming to church, I knelt before the Lord every Sunday and prayed — even shed tears — and continued to visit the families.

Finally, with the permission of our mission superior and parish priest, I carried the monstrance and Blessed Sacrament to the village. That evening we had adoration for four hours, for the intentions of the village.

Sincere prayer is never in vain. Slowly, people came back to church, even more than before. As a sign of our reunited faithful, we had a thanksgiving Mass and celebration. Our tireless efforts worked! I rejoice that God can make use of a weak instrument like me in his vineyard.

The wonderful families I have met are good friends who inspire and teach me. One incident really moved me — the family of a little girl in fourth grade wanted me to be there for her birthday celebration. But it was during my annual retreat; the girl was sad but there was nothing I could do. After 10 days, I went to my village as usual, and after the prayer service the little girl took me by the hand and pulled me toward her home.

There she gave me a wrapped gift. "What is it?" I asked.

She looked at me with deep love, smiled at me, and said, "My love. I missed you a lot on my birthday." I was surprised at how she was able to answer me. "Since you were not here, I had asked my mother to keep some dry meat for you," the girl said.

I was speechless. The girl eagerly waits for me every Sunday.

There's a story behind this: There were doubts and misunderstanding between her parents, and I noticed that the child was sad and moody. During my visits, I would ask her how she was doing. At first, her father would have nothing to do with me, but I didn't give up. As time passed, the family changed for the better. They are reunited and they say that the good Lord has worked through me.

I have had several experiences like this. I feel close to them, and I feel pain in their struggles, and joy in their success.

Life is a gift of God. Let's open our eyes and see how blessed we are. What are the lovely things you can share? How can you touch the lives of others? You will also experience love and care in abundance.

[Frida Toppo is a Missionary Sister of the Immaculate from Chhattisgarh, Eastern India. She currently is working in Loyola School, Bishnupur, run by the Jesuits in the Imphal Archdiocese, Manipur state, Northeast India. She also serves as the animator of the Maria Niketan community in Bishnupur.]