Columns
Religious Life



A horizon is pictured in Blantyre, Malawi, where Sr. Odilia Wonondo currently resides. (Unsplash/Malawi)



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February 15, 2024

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Sisters in Africa are only now really thinking about retirement and what it means for us. For me, retirement is a time of blessings and I have learned that wisdom and gratitude go together. As I look back over my life, all I can say is, "*Thank you*." It has been a wonderful life of ups and downs, learning to live with women of other cultures and learning to appreciate my own too.

I have now reached 82 years old and next year will celebrate 60 years as a Daughter of Wisdom living in Malawi, a former British colony in East Africa. I was already a vowed sister when it became independent in 1964. I was in the second group of Malawian women to join the Daughters of Wisdom, and the first to receive formation locally. The group ahead of me went to England for their formation.



Sr. Odilia Wonondo's catechumen class is pictured. These students from Our Lady of Wisdom boarding secondary school have all been prepared for sacraments and are now full members of the church. (Courtesy of Odilia Wonondo)

Ours was a Catholic family; my father was a builder by trade, and a church elder. Even with his meager income, he earned enough to send all of us to school. I had five brothers and four sisters — the sixth born, the youngest girl, and the only one of the girls to reach junior secondary school.

We lived in a small village, and I have fond memories of our evenings together where our brothers taught us songs and our grandmother told us stories. When the moon was full, we played hide and seek, ending each evening with family prayer.

The Daughters of Wisdom were my teachers in primary and secondary school. I loved visiting their convent chapel when they were praying. The sisters were very warm, loving women, but also kept discipline — which I learned when I was scolded for something I did not do. When the sister discovered the real culprit, she apologized, an important moment for me. That a sister would apologize to a student reflected humility and simplicity, which I experienced as a characteristic of the sisters.

I had already begun teaching when I decided to enter the convent with three other young teachers. It was a quick decision for me because I had only taught for six months when I decided it was time to follow God's call. The class I was teaching was so distressed that I was leaving. They marched to the district education officer to stop me from leaving. Although I was sad to leave, I was happy to know that the students appreciated my teaching. Even now, when I meet up with some of them, we have a good laugh about that time.

When we retire, it is a good time to look back on our life and see it as a whole. There were challenges and benefits that all had an impact on my vocation. One was leaving behind a young man I had promised to wait for and didn't! While practicing teaching, I became good friends with a young man who wanted to marry me, but asked me to wait for him while he went to Europe for seven years. I promised to wait but God had other plans. I had already made first vows and was about to renew them when the young man returned. I was sitting on the veranda of the convent when I recognized him.

When he saw me, I put my head down, hoping he would not see me but he came over to ask me why I had not kept the promise to wait. I apologized and explained that my call was not to marriage, but to be a sister. He went away dejected. Some years later, we met up again when he was returning from another time in Europe. By then, he had married a widowed friend of mine. The three of us stayed friends and laugh about how our lives had changed over time.

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That was one challenge I faced in my life. Another had to do with different ways of "understanding common sense." This became clear when I was commuting to college and forgot to get bus money from my superior. Realizing my mistake too late, I decided to use lunch money for the ticket and replace it later. That decision was not common sense to my superior, and she would not reimburse my lunch money. I would have gone without lunch for several days without friends who shared their lunches with me. It was a hard lesson to learn, "*Common sense is never common*."

Another challenge I faced in these years was at a time when there were few vocations. There were only three of us Africans professed and two first-year novices. The situation seemed so dire that our formation director insisted that the congregation close down in Malawi, leave, and send Africans back to our villages. Her proposal was a bombshell. Tears flowed down our cheeks. But God heard the cry of her daughters: The superior general vetoed the proposal. And presently, Malawi is receiving more vocations!

The hardest thing for us Africans in joining a European congregation was the change of food. We suffered until the superior general arrived for visitation and asked if African food was ever served. With the negative answer, things changed and we could once again enjoy our nsima, vegetables, kapenta and chicken prepared in a Malawian way at least once or twice a day. That was a day of rejoicing.



A Daughter of Wisdom sister preparing guava juice to share with their neighbors who don't have guavas in their area (Courtesy of Odilia Wonondo)

My apostolic work as a teacher in primary and secondary mission schools lasted for 42 years, when the computer retired me. I taught in our private secondary school for seven more years, and then ventured into catechetics. This was not new to me because before entering the convent I had been involved in teaching catechism in my parish. It was somewhat different because I also presented retreat programs, and even prepared reflections for the readings of the day for our Malawi national

radio.

Though I enjoyed every ministry I engaged in these many years, retirement has been a blessing for me. Along the way, I learned to value myself as someone loved by God and not for the work I was doing.

I enjoy community life with six others. One is working as a teacher, one as the bursar of the school, one as a librarian as well as infirmarian, one as administrator in one of our hospitals and one is pursuing studies at our Catholic University. Having the house quiet most of the days, I have grown to love the solitude — being alone with the *Alone*.

But I also have interesting activities. Right now, we are enjoying guava season so I prepare this delicious fruit in different ways — like guava juice and dessert — and share with our neighbors who do not have these trees. I am selling chitenje fabric, printed with Radio Maria on it, as we will celebrate its 25th anniversary of broadcasting next year. So far, out of the 20 rolls of fabric, I have sold 12.

But, most of all, I spend time just being grateful for my life as a sister and our mission to make God's love known to everyone. I love my family, our church, and my congregation — specifically the English Province and U.S. where I spent my years as a young sister — and all the people God continues to bring into my life. I give back in gratitude whatever I can.