Columns
Spirituality



The bridge to a newly constructed road leads to the compound of the Medical Missionaries of Mary in Torugbene, a remote riverine community in Delta State, Nigeria. Many people cannot reach their compound, and the sisters travel by canoe to offer medical services in the surrounding villages. (Janefrances Oluchi Ihekuna)



by Janefrances Oluchi Ihekuna

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Torugbene, Nigeria — March 10, 2025

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

When I arrived in Torugbene, I was both excited and anxious. I had heard stories about this remote riverine community in Delta State, Nigeria, but nothing could fully prepare me for the reality of life here. The challenges are immense — flooding, environmental degradation and government neglect — but so is the resilience and generosity of the people.

My name is Janefrances Oluchi Ihekuna, and I am a sister of the Medical Missionaries of Mary. I grew up in Nigeria, where I first got to know the congregation through a friend who shared their vocation leaflet with me. Drawn to their healing charism and mission, I joined in 2019 and made my first profession of vows in September 2023. When I was assigned to Torugbene, I knew it would be a transformative experience, but I did not anticipate how much it would shape my faith, my understanding of mission and my very way of seeing the world.

The people of Torugbene belong to the Ijaw ethnic group, one of the ancient Oru tribes. They have preserved their ancient language and cultural traditions. Most engage in fishing for sustenance and for selling at the market. Despite the hardships they face, their warmth and hospitality are remarkable. From the moment I arrived, they welcomed me with open arms, generously sharing what little they had.

Like the people, we sisters experience the same daily challenges — scarcity of resources, poor infrastructure and a constant fight for survival. At times, we find ourselves complaining, but then we remember that we are living among people who have been largely abandoned by their national government. Their rich, fertile land and many natural resources are being sacrificed to oil drilling and mining, yet they receive no compensation or assistance. Instead, their rivers are polluted, their roads are impassable, and they are left without electricity or clean drinking water. The once-thriving fishing industry has been devastated by oil spills, forcing the people to turn to farming — an increasingly difficult endeavor as their land is being destroyed by drilling and mining.

Despite these hardships, we sisters work hard to cultivate vegetables and crops to supplement nutrition and encourage new farming methods. Food is scarce, but we

have learned a lot about sharing with the community. We encourage them to grow and eat vegetables, something new to many, to improve their diets.

Advertisement

Torugbene sits on a creek in the Burutu Local Government Area under the Diocese of Bomadi. Every year from June to November, the community is submerged by flooding. Children learn to swim at an early age, not for recreation but for survival. When the water rises, families are forced to sleep on the second floor of their huts while the river claims the lower level of their homes.

During these months, movement is difficult. People construct makeshift "monkey bridges" to connect their homes, allowing them to go outside to bathe, dispose of waste, and fetch water for cooking and drinking — all from the same river. Long-distance travel is possible only by boat or canoe. We sisters rarely leave our house unless it is absolutely necessary, such as to visit the clinic or respond to emergencies. When we do travel, we also use a canoe or the local monkey bridges.

I remember the first time I witnessed the flooding season. Fear gripped me as I watched people scramble to save what little they owned, their belongings floating away with no destination. Yet, amid the destruction, I witnessed something shocking and encouraging: unity. The people saw the floods not just as a disaster but as an opportunity to help one another. Their solidarity moved me deeply, teaching me to go beyond suffering and pity and focus on how I could assist those displaced by the waters.

One of my most memorable experiences was learning to paddle a local canoe. At first, it was difficult, but it became a metaphor for how to live a good Christian life. Just as I had to direct the canoe where I wanted it to go, I realized how I live my life today determines my future. If I stay on course, I will reach my final destination — heaven.

Working here is shaping me in humility, acceptance and gratitude. Whenever I am tempted to dwell on my own struggles, I remember that the people around me endure far greater hardships, yet they continue to find the means of surviving and even joy. Their resilience challenges me to live my vows with renewed sincerity and commitment.



Medical Missionaries of Mary practice paddling a canoe in their compound after a flood. (Janefrances Oluchi Ihekuna)

As Medical Missionaries of Mary, we engage in various apostolates to serve the community in this region. Our clinic provides essential healthcare, and as a trained physiotherapist, I use my skills to assist those in need. Since many people cannot reach us, we travel by canoe to offer medical services in the surrounding villages.

We also focus on youth ministry, meeting with young people once a month to help them develop life skills and healthy habits. Some have been given opportunities to

study outside their community, broadening their horizons. Two young women trained in hotel management, and one young man pursued electrical engineering at the John Bosco Institute of Technology in Akure, Nigeria.

We run a three-month development program for women that teaches baking skills, enabling them to support their families. Currently, 18 women are participating in this initiative. Upon completion, they receive basic equipment to start their own businesses. They learn to make cakes, meat pies, puff-puffs, doughnuts and other snacks — small but significant steps toward self-sufficiency.

Once a week, we hold a school program for children and young adults, teaching them English, reading and writing. This has been a great help to them in learning to communicate and socialize better with English-speaking visitors.

Parish work is also part of our mission, though reaching remote areas is difficult. Because there are few roads, we travel by canoe along the sea coast to participate in parish activities and offer religious education. Despite the challenges, the people always welcome us with joy. They tell us how much it means to them that we remember and visit them, even when it is difficult.

I have been in Torugbene for more than a year, and every day, I see how this mission draws me closer to God. Even amid poverty, sickness, and abandonment by their government leaders, God keeps people going. They truly embody the fruits of the Spirit — togetherness, love and humility.

Their faith challenges mine. Their way of life teaches me to never allow any situation to prevent me from living peacefully with myself or others. The mission in Torugbene is not about the service I give; it is about what I receive — the grace to witness God’s presence in the most unexpected places.