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An Interview with Fr. Oscar SAGWANTI, SMM, a missionary in Italy

CALABRIA, Italy - Just before he clocked 50, marking the Golden jubilee birthday celebration and 25th anniversary of religious life in the Company of Mary, Fr. Oscar SAGWANTI, SMM, from Africa Anglophone Delegation, received obedience to go to Italy for a new mission. He had mixed feelings as his request to first celebrate the silver jubilee was not granted. However, motivated and recalling the point of actions of the Acts of the General Chapter 1993, acting together and availability, he joyfully accepted and currently enjoys the mission in Bianco community, Calabria, Italy. Fr. Jailos MPINA, SMM had a conversation with Fr. Oscar.

Please briefly share your background with us.

I was born in Thyolo, Malawi and I grew up there, however, my parents come from Nsanje district. I did my Primary School both in Thyolo and Nsanje districts. Then I went to Mzimu Woyera (Holy Spirit) Seminary for secondary school education in Chikwawa. I joined the Montfort Missionaries in 1992 and studied philosophy at the Inter-Congregational Seminary in Balaka, Malawi. I joined the novitiate in Mbarara, Uganda and I made my First profession in 1997. Then I joined the Scholasticate International community in Kenya for theology at Hekima Jesuit college from 1997 to 2000. When I finished, I went back home to join an itinerant team but that didn't work so I went back to Kenya and did Computer Engineering and counselling both at diploma level.

I did my final profession in 2001 and got ordained a Deacon and on the 29th of June 2002, I was ordained a priest. I received obedience for Bvumbwe – Namtipwiri community (2002-2003), Pre-Postulancy master and Vocations Promoter (2003-2006), parish priest at Stima parish in Zomba (2006-2010), assistant parish priest at Bvumbwe parish (2010-2014),

Sabbatical and psychological counselling course at St. Anselm in England and I finished the course in Rome (2014). I joined Luntha Television in Malawi in 2018 and 2019, and thereafter, I served in Mbarara, Uganda in 2019 and 2022 as the Vocations Promoter and the chaplain of the hospital. Meanwhile, I was also the chaplain of convents of sisters and primary school.

How did you react when your Delegate Superior asked you to serve in the Italian Province?

I was turning 50 that time and it was a little bit of a shock that somebody at 50 to be asked to do a new mission. Within the delegation, it wasn't going to appear as a new mission but outside the delegation it sounded a new mission because it is something that the delegation had never taken before. It wasn't that I wasn't willing, but I was a little bit shocked that at this age, why can't they send young confreres. That was the first reaction. The second reaction was about the language, that I'll have to struggle again to learn a new language, why can't they send people who have already had the basics of Italian language. However, at the back of my mind and this is what plays around me all the time when I'm given a new mission is the outcome of the General Chapter of 1993 where one of the three cornerstones was availability. Throughout my religious profession, throughout my formation, this for me has been a very strong element in my life that despite everything, I must be available to the congregation, to my superiors. Of course, you have a chance to discuss and be able to say, well, I feel this can be challenging but with the spirit of availability, I accepted this mission very happily.

What is the mission like in the Bianco community? And are you happy with the Montfortian community and the pastoral engagement with the people in Calabria?

First, when I arrived, I was very positive and I'm still very positive because it wasn't very hard to have positive and smooth insertion since it is a community of confreres who have been missionaries who are coming from different places. We had one member, Fr. Maria Cletus DAVID, SMM, who is originally from India, and he is now transferred to another parish. We have one member who has been a missionary in Madagascar and Peru. Two other members who have been missionaries to Malawi, one was also a missionary in Malawi, Kenya plus Brazil and Peru. Therefore, it is a community of confreres who have huge experience of mission. So, it is easier.

The community members made us feel comfortable even when we struggle with the language. They understand that learning a language is not easy. For example, one of the members of the community says to be comfortable and master Malagasy, you have to do it after five years. So, it gives us hope that despite the difficulty of the language, there's still light at the end of the tunnel. The community members have been very supportive in our mission, in our activities. They even made a provision of a retired primary school teacher to teach us Italian and we are very grateful to the community.

We are in a community of six parishes, and Fr. Fortune GONDWE, SMM and me are serving in two parishes that is the Parish of Bianco and the Parish of Pardesca. So, this is how the mission is: visiting the sick, giving sacraments as far as we can, animating the youth ministry. We are learning slowly and adding to the knowledge that we have. I'm enjoying the office work because it has to do with documentation.

To say the fact, I'm enjoying my mission. I am looking forward to going for my first holiday next year (2025) and also to celebrate my 25 years of religious life. One thing that pained me

when I arrived here is the fact that I was not allowed to go back home and celebrate my silver jubilee in religious life. I am now happy, and we are making a lot of progress in the community and pastoral engagement.

Can we describe this as a learning process for the Africa Anglophone Delegation?

Yes, this is a learning process, a learning moment for the delegation because we are also sending some members to United States of America. Despite the fact that they have different challenges than us but still more, maybe sharing ideas and experiences of how the mission is, will be helpful.

NB: The following are the current members of Bianco International Community namely: Fr. Angelo MAFFEIS, SMM, the parish priest of Tutti I Santi of Bianco and Pardesca (20 years in Africa - Malawi and Kenya, 20 years in Latin Americas – Peru, Brazil, Bolivia and 4 years as a Procurator of Mission). Fr. Eugenio SALMASO, SMM, the parish priest of St. Agatha and Caraffa who has been a missionary in Africa – Malawi for 40 years. Fr. Pietro LONNI, SMM, the parish priest of Casignana and Samo, served in Madagascar for 22 years and 8 years in Peru. Fr. Oscar SAGWANTI, SMM and Fr. Fortune GONDWE, SMM, the assistants to the parish priest in Bianco and Pardesca.

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