

History of a Foundation

By way of Preface

Dear brothers and sisters,

During my last visit to Togo, I had an experience worth mentioning. At the beginning of the year in Kara, a town near the Brothers' monastery, I ran into a lady who knows the Brothers well. She told me « there are three crazy people in Kara; the first one is my husband Théophile, the second one is Father Antonio and the third one is Brother Boniface». She burst out laughing. What could that possibly mean? Why did she call the three men mad? That is easy to explain. Each of these men had initiated amazing, unanticipated projects that were beyond what is considered normal. So they had made a somewhat unusual impression and we often shook our heads because of their crazy exploits.

But let us forget the first two and focus on Brother Boniface. What was his madness, his abnormality? I am not thinking about the folly of his youth. Let us start with the 1984 madness. In that year, he decided to build a monastic community. That sounds good. And what were the conditions, the means with which to implement this plan? There was nothing to it. He himself was still quite young; he was 26 - a young man who had not yet completed his education, one who had no money to his name, nor assistance or support. Nobody understood him; but from the other side, there were many who strongly criticised his path and who shook their heads. Nevertheless, he started, all by himself, and succeeded. But why did he do what he did? Perhaps because, like a stubborn man, he held on to that singular idea of establishing a monastery? That may be so! His behaviour was that of a stubborn man. But deep down there was another reason which he himself explained on the souvenir picture of his ordination. He quotes the words of the Prophet Jeremiah: «Oh Lord, you have deceived me!» This means that his monastic search was the result of a deception – a divine deception. It is an unexpected word. It sounds like a complaint, an accusation: « Lord, you called me but you have deceived me a little. The path of my calling was often harder than I had expected. Your hand was often hard and the light of your love often became a dark night or a raging storm. » Brother Boniface seems to be saying such words when he says: « You

have deceived me, Lord! » But Jeremiah the Prophet continues, along with Brother Boniface, by telling Him: "and I let myself be deceived. You have overcome me once again, You are the greatest." And that was his luck. So he is now happy to be so captivated by the Lord. In the long run this road has been worth the trouble. "Thank you, Lord, for this deception. You still took hold of me again, and you made me walk the way of my calling, in spite of the mockery of sensible men. The folly of my way is the product of your divine wisdom, the result of your providence of love. This is the same idea found in the words of Saint Paul: "For the foolishness of God is wiser than men... and what is foolish in the world, this is what God has chosen". However in this game of providence there are other crazy people. I wish to mention one person, or rather one lady: Mama Yvonne Kayser. She has supported Brother Boniface for 14 years. How could she have faith in this young African, in spite of the ups and downs of his life? It was incredible! We can say: this confidence, which often seems insane, was an instrument of providence and divine wisdom. And we can say with Jesus: Woman, great is your faith! But she is an enthusiastic woman who also knows how to ignite others. And she did it. She ignited her family, the parish and many friends. Many thanks to you all who have supported and encouraged this young African throughout a very long journey and in all its windings. Today we know that you have all been instruments of providence and divine wisdom. Ah, all of you, your faith is great! God has blessed your good intentions, your adopted son Boniface is the first priest of this parish. And what is remarkable is that, like St. Anthony the Hermit, the patron of your parish, Boniface is both a monk and an African. Anthony was a hermit in Egypt i.e. in Africa. It is he, St Anthony, who sent you this young African for you to adopt as a true citizen of the parish of St. Antoine de Retzwiller. Boniface is therefore a true son of your parish. I would like to add another aspect: Today's ordination to the priesthood and First Mass are the result of a very long and adventurous journey. But it is also the beginning of a new phase that is not any less adventurous. Brother Boniface is ordained to the pastoral service: for his brothers in the community and for all people. Serving people is not an unfamiliar or new thing for our Brother Boniface. He is gifted and has a lot of experience in this area. But now this is more than simple service: it is a service under authority. He is now responsible for a service that derives both from a religious and priestly authority. It is something great but also dangerous. We know from church history that many Priests and Bishops have misused their clerical authority. In the Gospel already Jesus warns us about this abuse of clerical power, when he exhorts us not to be called "Father" and "Master", because there is only one Father and Master, the One who is in heaven. And that whoever wishes to be great, must make himself the servant of all. Therefore Boniface wishes to maintain the title of Brother, to

avoid every form of arrogance or presumption. It is a good sign, Thank you Boniface! But we must not forget that there are also battles and wars between brothers: Cain, for example, killed his brother Abel; and an older brother may also oppress his younger brothers, as is also common in the African culture. Therefore, basically, the issue is not about words, titles or ranks, but about the actual reality and an altruistic and selfless service until one's death. Serving means never to be deceived by power and violence, but rather to be seduced by the love of God, a love that keeps nothing for itself but gives everything and at all times. Serving means: not promoting oneself while developing others, not hurting anyone but healing the wounds of people; not fighting but reconciling enemies; not dividing people but uniting them and leading them to God. But the best method of serving is to be not only the servant of all but also to educate people in the basic art of living as brothers and sisters and training them for mutual service. We all must be servants to one another. What applies to the service of Boniface the priest applies also to us all, to a certain extent. Your joint effort in Brother Boniface's journey was already an indication of this. Remain true to this approach of joint service, of mutual service, in all areas of your life. Together, we are always very strong. Through mutual support we can bear much fruit because the Lord is in our midst. "If two or three come together in his NAME" Together, and only together, we can build a new world. These are also the words that our Togolese brothers will be singing now: "Together, together we can create a new world together!"

Father Abbot Fidelis osb

of the Abbey of Münsterschwarzach (Germany) for the First Mass of
Brother Boniface Tiguila OSB, September 29, 1991 in Retzwiller, (France)

History of the Monastic Brotherhood of the Incarnation, Agbang

It all began with Brother Boniface Tiguila's experience of monastic life:

"On June 13, 1973, after a long journey, which is itself another adventure with God, I discovered with fascination the monastic life at the Benedictine Priory of the Ascension in Dzogbégan. I was 15 years old. From the outset, I had this conviction: this is my life. This life was intended for me. Day after day, stay after stay, year after year confirmed this irresistible attraction for that simple life, lived under the gaze of God in prayer, brotherly life and work."

When, on October 1, 1978, during the Feast of St. Thérèse of Lisieux which is a feast of the Novitiate of Dzogbégan, I entered this community, I was 20 years old. I had just sat my Baccalaureate examinations and had already visited the monastery twelve times during my free time and school holidays.

In all the years that had gone by between my first visit and actual entry, I was able to fan the flames of my desire for this life that was made for me. The fact that I already knew the community fairly well enabled me to enter the novitiate earlier in May 1979 (i.e. 7 months of postulancy instead of one year).

But 1979 made me realise that my place was not in Dzogbégan: "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you!" (Gen 12:: 1)

What madness, what an illusion, how utopic! I refused to listen to that voice. I struggled, I hid. What bothered me the most about this issue is the fact that I could not tell where it came from, what this was all about. If only I knew how this certainty had imposed itself on me. No, I cannot, up to now, say how, from where or why I happened to feel that this call of Abraham: "leave your home" was also for me. So like a "demon" that possesses one without knowing from whence it came, I have held on to it and have given it a name that reveals all its mystery: "Intuition".

Throughout the year of my canonical novitiate I bore this intuition like a backpack. At times, this intuition was a burden that I had to unload onto the shoulders of the Lord by pointing out to Him that in any case it was He who was responsible for it. But on other occasions, curiously, this intuition seemed like a light yoke that the Lord, who is meek and lowly of heart, invites us to wear in order to find rest in Him. After that I dreamt and I wrote everything that came to my mind in a notebook.

But with the passage of time I could no longer continue with the solitary struggle while people who only wanted to help me were brought my way.

So, I decided to talk to my Novice Master on April 26, 1980. He was stunned! What had I told him? Oh, nothing much, because there was really nothing to tell. I think I said something like: "I think the Lord is calling me to establish something else that is simpler, closer to the people and more African." Oh yes! From the beginning these concepts of simpler, closer to the people and more

African were clear. And I also think that I was not able to elaborate, having nothing more to add.

How I needed courage that afternoon! How I sweated on that hot April afternoon; it was a real birthing. And I felt so poor and so stupid but at the same time so free. The cry of the child that came out of this delivery, it was Father Stéphane Zechariah, my Novice Master, who made it. Had he really heard me, understood? "What? Oh, you're dreaming. Do not let yourself get caught in the trap of diabolical illusions," he told me in essence. Then he tried to better understand how I had got to that place. He asked questions, trying to unravel the secret, to get closer to the mystery.

But, alas, he stumbled on my silence, on my inability to say more. We both found ourselves so helpless, so poor, and so stupid! What to do? Yet the fire of that intuition was burning me, consuming me.

The great spiritual experience of Stephan inspired him with the right approach: He suggested that I pray before the Blessed Sacrament. He was there, as well, before the Blessed Sacrament and loaded with this intuition of mine; we took off our sandals, meaning all our intellectual, rational and human understanding, so that we could simply bow down before this mystery that we did not understand but which beckoned us. We prayed. We were supposed to pray that God would take these illusions away from me. But curiously, I felt like Moses before the Lord. I tried to find all the reasons for not responding to this call, but God had an answer for every objection.

"Oh, my Lord, send, I pray, some other person, not me!" (Ex 4:13) Actually it bothered me to think that I would one day have to leave Dzogbégan. For God is my witness that I loved and still love Dzogbégan as my first love. But the more I refused, the more God became angry and the more my intuition was confirmed. So I wrote, and wrote and still continued to write.

But I have, unfortunately, not kept that first notebook. Like the tablets of the Law (first edition), I had to lose this notebook by burning it. I personally and freely decided this after my religious profession. Besides, no one knew about the existence of this notebook. And now I do not remember a single sentence written on all those pages. I therefore decided to burn this book after my profession so as not to continue living under the illusion.

With my profession I wanted to experience monastic life without a second thought and without cheating. This was very important. With Father Stephan we

made several novenas in prayer but strangely, like Victor Hugo's Cain, after each novena I would answer him that the eye of the conscience was still there. In autumn 1980, the community decided to send me to the Benedictine monastery of Mount Fébé in Cameroon with Fr Thomas for a session on African anthropology. Was this an attempt to have me get rid of my illusions? I do not think so, but if that was the intention, again the experience described by Victor Hugo confirmed that in spite of everything, that eye was still there. In my case I ended up living with that intuition, not as the accusing eye of Cain's conscience, but as the watchful eye, full of concern about the providence of God who looks and sees the lives of his people, yet still sends whoever He wishes. I returned from this session with a confirmation about my intuition. I just had an assurance about it, but nothing could be clearer.

On my return the community continued to trust me and to even give me responsibilities. But deep down I felt like Moses in Pharaoh's palace after killing an Egyptian. The community continued to give me every opportunity to develop myself, I was able to carry out my profession and still quietly go through the three years of my profession. The Lord knew that I needed this enabling environment at all costs for training and accumulating all the experience that would help me later in the portion of God's field He would give me to plough. Did Moses return even once to say thank you to Pharaoh or to his daughter and her court? No text tells us this.

As for me, I can tell you that I have not yet thanked the Monastery of Dzogbégan. Will I do it one day? Should I do it? God will take care of this and I know that my brothers from Dzogbégan do not expect 'the hen to thank the rubbish heap where it will continue to glean'.

And yet I know that this is not clear and for that they deserve to be shown gratitude. It was for them and for me a terrible act of faith!

Then came the exodus, the great departure, the great crossing!

On 27 April 1984, I crossed the sea (the Mediterranean) and, on the other side of the sea, I experienced my first spring in this adventure. I contemplated through memories, so many days, events, people I had to abandon on the other side (in Togo) so that I could be free and light enough to cross the sea and go to where He was waiting for me. "We do not live without saying 'goodbye'. One cannot live without dying a little, without giving something or someone up, to go further in his path. ».

My exodus took thirteen months. It was an adventure. Wandering like my father ("a wandering Aramean was my father " Dt 26 : 5), I finally understood and knew by experience that a person is ready to be an instrument in God's hands only when they accept to sacrifice all their assurances, their security, their only hope; the only Isaac for whom one has lived . Yes, Lord, you have winnowed, shaken ... you demanded everything of me, even the assurance that you are with me. You wanted a real act of faith, a blank cheque, a crazy act... Lord, why do you have this habit of sharing your cross with your friends?

I did this crazy thing on June 14, 1985. On the plane ride back home to Togo I accepted the mystical marriage into poverty:

A star once sang, "I realized then how much I love you Patrick". I realized at that moment how God's love was blinding me. I did not have both feet on the ground. For saying yes to this crazy plan of founding a monastery with nothing else but my bare hands and my utopic generosity, one had to really have one's head in the clouds when signing such a contract. And actually I was in the clouds at an altitude of 10,000 meters in the Saharan sky.

But when I took a look down, I felt dizzy in the face of the madness that I had to subscribe to. Yet the "Yes" had already been said. And I wanted it to be final, no turning back. A struggle then began in me. How, where to start, why...

"⁷You deceived me, LORD, and I was deceived; You overpowered me and prevailed. I am ridiculed all day long; everyone mocks me. ⁸ Whenever I speak, I cry out proclaiming violence and destruction. So the word of the LORD has brought me insult and reproach all day long. ⁹ But if I say, "I will not mention his word or speak anymore in his name", his word is in my heart like a fire, a fire shut up in my bones. I am weary of holding it in; indeed, I cannot"! (Jer 20: 7-9).

No need to try to resist. We should put everything in God's hands. Which I did... I said to Him: Lord, I will do what you tell me to.

I landed in Lomé peacefully and there, as expected, the Lord had marked my path: I had to go to Dzogbégan to sever the ties, to cut off the umbilical cord before going to meet my Bishop.

Pedagogy of the unknown!

Yes, in this God, our God excels.

Be led by the unknown, not knowing anything beforehand, not even the name of the One who sent you!

It was necessary for me to undertake my Baccalaureate studies, specialising in mathematics so that, well established in the Cartesian mind which leaves nothing to chance, I would be able to attend this college of the Lord! Thank you for that preparation!

What is more surprising is that when I look back at all this, I myself have become an accomplice in this game of the absurd, where the destiny of my life and many more lives is played out. And to think that I wove my own rope and made the knot myself and put this noose around my neck, to be driven by the logic that says "go understand something"! Unbelievable but true nevertheless.

Where is the Moses who knew how to respond to the Lord and say, "Send whom you like, but not me"? Moses knew that if he stood before the sons of Israel, he would have to make a somewhat coherent speech, and that when they asked him questions, he should know what to say. I also knew that I needed to know at least the Name of the one I claimed to have heard from.

But what gave Moses the determination to go? What gives me the determination to get involved anyway? I am unable to believe, even now, that it was I who have been able to go to Dzogbégan to reiterate, after thirteen months, taken to get a better grasp of what I had said on that first day: "I think the Lord is calling me to establish something else that is simpler, closer to people and more African. This is what I know; for the rest I am not very sure, I do not yet fully understand. But to me it is clear that we must do it. So I will leave you because it is no longer useful for me to remain here."

It was Sunday, June 16, 1985 in a hotel room in Dzogbégan with Father Michel Coquin, who was the Prior at the time. When one comes back after 13 months with that and nothing else, can you imagine what one looks like?

I, at any rate, know what I looked like. Yes I seemed to be the person who had believed that people were wrong when they said that what he wanted to do by going to Europe was nothing more than "spiritual tourism".

But still, shamefully, I returned to confirm for myself that people were not mistaken and that they were totally right. On 17th June 1985 I left Dzogbégan and went to Kara. And on Wednesday, June 19, 1985, I went to Bishop Chrétien

Bakpessi of Sokodé asking him to kindly allow me to begin my experience in his diocese.

The Bishop drew my attention to the fact that I had not followed his advice and that I should not sever ties with Dzogbégan. Yet just like old Gamaliel he would not get in the way of a work that the Lord probably wanted. He then told me: "Well, go and we shall see." Up to now those words "go and we shall see" still resonate in my ears.

It is normal for those words to continue to be echoed as long as the Monastery of the Incarnation remains, because we must never forget that it is from this tacit agreement with Bishop Bakpessi that work on the monastery of the Incarnation in Agbang began.

Day after day, Fiat after Fiat, after many hours and nights spent wondering where to begin, after many hopes and doubts, illusions and disappointments I decided to rent a house in Kara to live in "solitary confinement" as I waited. I found my Bethany among the Sisters of Providence of St Paul. Indeed these sisters were the Providence along my way.

On August 6, 1985, during the Feast of Transfiguration, in an act of faith, I began the work in the house of Mr. Bidjada in Kara, in the Chaminade neighbourhood where I rented two rooms and a living room. On August 9, 1985 Pope John Paul ii was received in Kara.

I was not alone for long. Already James M'bessagou, Jean Bassessi, Innocent Mabowé and Koffi Tchala, from different backgrounds, had arrived to experience the first steps of this journey of madness together with me. They were all students at the time. We had to organize ourselves to have a modicum of prayer life, fellowship and work. We especially had to learn how to live together accepting our differences as an asset. In November 1985 the fifth person, Stéphane Kouvahè, a mechanic by profession, joined us.

While these young people went to school, my job was to go out in search of food, of money, and of a plot of land for our work to take root in. Even now, I am amazed at how I found all this normal.

Without anything else in mind except that obsession, I moved heaven and earth. I wrote to the Prefect, went to meet with him, I wrote to the Minister for Infrastructure in search of land. God was by my side laughing at how busy I was.

He had already made all the arrangements. At the beginning of October 1985, François Abouzi gave us his old moped, bought in 1978.

One morning in October 1985, Mr. Nicolas Badja towed me with his old motorbike and hey presto! Off we were to visit his farm in Agbang.

No sooner had we arrived there than I ceased to be concerned about him or his farm. I was fascinated by a hill. The hill of "Siu Samiyè" (the fetish of Samiyè) beckoned me. I climbed it effortlessly and gazed at its little plateau. It then became clear to me that this was truly "the mountain that the Lord had chosen to abide on"!

From that time I had one urgent matter on my mind: to make arrangements for its acquisition. The Lord had prepared everything. Just weeks afterwards, it was clear, we could settle there. As it was already mid-November, I was driving our visitors from Hamburg, Monsignor Joseph Casanova, Family Kiciuzk and Family Wowk. I often returned just to listen to "the whisper of a light breeze". On weekends, I would have liked to go with the youth to start working, but asked myself how to get there! It was a distance of more than 20 Km.

But on Monday, December 27, 1985, crammed into the small Peugeot 504 from 'Foyer Pierre du Pauvre': Brother Boniface - Jean - Innocent and - Koffi - Stephan and Claire Tagba, we went to work there for the first time and sing the Midday Prayer. That day, armed with machetes, hoes and pickaxes, we tried to hew out a road so that we could access it by car. And at noon we found ourselves under the mango trees at the top of the hill singing to the Lord. As we recited Psalm 36, it sounded appropriate for the occasion:

"Trust in the Lord, and do good, so you will dwell in the land and enjoy security. Take delight in the Lord, and He shall give you the desires of your heart. Commit your way to the Lord; trust in Him, and He will act... Be still before the Lord, ...fret not yourself over him who prospers in his way...I have been young, and now I am old; Yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken or his children begging bread...Depart from evil, and do good, so shall you abide for ever."

This is the word that we must constantly keep in mind if we wish to have a permanent dwelling on this hill of Agbang. The meal with Aklesso Alazi presented the first opportunity to share the idea with our neighbours. Mr. Aklesso Badja brought us slices of yam and Alazi brought maize porridge with fresh milk.

Yet it is important to say that for many days we barely found anything to eat. Yet thanks to Mr. Nicolas Badja, head of Caritas in the Parish of St Peter and St Paul of Kara, we could get some supplies. And after that it was the turn of Mrs Maria Giovanna Pouli to help us secure some food from Cathwell. Yes, hardly had we found food than I began to have another crazy dream of having a car to enable us to work regularly in the field.

On 4th January 1986 this was accomplished. When our friends from Hamburg had come to visit, they had given us 2,000 German Marks which I had kept in a safe place. When we found a Volkswagen van that an expatriate was selling, we asked Fr Adjola Raphael, priest of Kara for the 100,000 CFAF that we needed in order to raise the amount required. On January 4, 1986 we were therefore able to buy the car, without knowing how it would run once the little petrol that was still in the tank had ran out. I was happy. Another crazy dream had just been fulfilled. Do not ask me how we pulled it off. The answer sounds more like a fable than a reality in the 20th century. Whenever I got a little petrol, I would take the Brothers and the young people of Kara to Agbang. In many cases, there was only enough fuel to cover just 15 kilometres. We covered the rest of the distance on foot. And there in the field we worked like niggers! (And this is the appropriate term here!)

Yet in spite of the precarious nature of that life we were happy, we sang, danced and fellowshiped... That van will always remember all those people that it carried: often 30 and even 35 once This is not sensible, you will tell me today, and you are right, because you have never found yourselves in that kind of situation. Young people offered to come and help us! And they were disappointed when it was not possible to take them to Agbang! What had they understood? What did they experience there? Was it the joy of being workers in the vineyard of the Lord? Yes, they are the real first builders of the edifice of living stones that is the Monastery of the Incarnation.

"O Lord our God, how majestic is your name in all the earth! From the lips of children, and infants you have ordained praise!" (Psalm 8)

Yes everyone has contributed something: the friendship of some, the faith of others and the hope of yet others, the help and encouragement of some, indifference and criticism of others... Divine Providence used everything and everyone to do its work. Friends in Europe, young people from the region, the Christian faithful of the parishes, the people from the villages around us, the fatherly concern of our Bishop...

To show how interested he was in what we were doing, in April 1986 during his pastoral visit to the parish, he went to the site to see the land in Agbang. At that time, there was nothing yet.

Indeed Divine Providence used everything and everyone to do its work. In February 1986, a young man, Pamphile Péré arrived. From February to March we were helping Mr. Nicolas Badja to dig a well at his home. It was hard work, but a good learning experience. Adrian Barandao joined the community. In April we began to make stabilized earth bricks and to clear the land where the first building was going to be erected. I suddenly became an architect and project manager. During those hot days of work under an extremely hot sun, a lot of young people came on board. I must also stress that from the beginning, Marcellin Akonéga had opted to join the project while still continuing his training at the technical school in Lomé. He came to live with us during his free time and school holidays. During the Easter of 1986, another young man, Bernard Anaté joined us for a first visit. The house in Kara was filled to capacity and construction work in Agbang needed to begin urgently.

In mid-August, I returned from France after my theology examinations in Strasbourg. During my trip, I was able to interest various people in our work. Everything they gave me enabled us to put up the first building. We made use of all the enthusiasm of our youth and in one month, from August 20 to September 20, we had finished. The covered 404 belonging to the Sisters of Providence of St. Paul suffered much on this building site. Every day come rain or shine, we worked like mad to have a home. I owe my brother in law Sabi Faou a lot of gratitude because out of generosity he joined us with his apprentice in January, to put up the first building for us. During the work of that month, a courageous neighbour, Francois Azoti came to help us and gradually became a regular. One year later, he was admitted as a regular oblate. On September 20, everything was ready. At least the roof, the doors and the windows were in place. The cement on the floor was still wet. In the rain we were able to appreciate what our hands, strengthened by the Lord, had just accomplished.

James - John - Koffi - Innocent - Marcellin - Stéphane - Bernard - Janvier - Nicolas – Agbémanyala, the Director of agricultural land services in Kara, who was a friend, and I were happily returning to Kara in the Sisters' covered 404. At the entrance to the town, a police commandant from the North kindly gave me the opportunity to visit the room where persons in police custody are held, so that I could greet all the destitute and forgotten persons and the wretched of the earth. This is an ordinary event, but it gave me the opportunity to know that Incarnation goes as far as that and that we must never forget to stoop as

low as that. Nobody should be forgotten. I only spent three hours there but when I left the place, I stank of urine and spit and of that dungeon. My brothers, the sisters of Providence, the Fathers from Kara and especially Brother Pierre Catin Chaminade and even the Colonel Commandant of the garrison of Landja, had to move heaven and earth, to get me out. At 10 p.m., when I got out of the dungeon, the lieutenant, a classmate who had come to get me out, could not believe his eyes. Thanks to all those who came to support me. Special thanks to the Lord who enabled me to draw attention to this misery that is so close to us but so hidden.

On September 22, 1986 Stephan, Pamphile, James, Bernard and I left for Agbang. The others remained in Kara in order to continue their education. Yes, since Monday, September 22, 1986 we were on that hill trying to entrench the monastic life in this land. Therefore Adrien, Koffi, Innocent and Jean were in Kara. On Wednesday, September 24, 1986 Fr Thomas of Dzogbégan celebrated the first Mass in the new building.

His sermon will be remembered for a long time " If you are faithful to your vocation, this place will become a centre of spirituality, holiness and development. Otherwise, the Fulani will come to divide the iron sheets and bricks of this building".

I leave it to others to relate in detail how indescribable the living conditions were in rural Agbang. At the end of 1986, we received our first eminent guests: Pierre Tavernier, Anne-France and Augustine from the community of the Cluny de Machy Cultural Office in France. They came to bring us the warmth of their fellowship and communion.

In February 1987, young Marc Dzankani, a force of nature, arrived.

From time immemorial, the most pressing problem was the critical issue of water. Each morning, we had to go through the drudgery of fetching water from a distance of 2 km.

One morning in March 1987, I went out and drew a circle on the ground near the mango trees. I asked the brethren to dig a well there. Indeed, the problem of water was becoming a concern. How many hours were we spending fetching water from the river? One had to drive with barrels in the car, fill them up, come and empty them into culverts. In the long run, we lived only for this chore when there were only two or three of us, or when the vehicle was not there. We had to solve this problem at all costs. The best solution was to have our own well on the hill. I made a circle, talked for a short time. The young people were convinced, and we got down to business. For months we worked with a pick,

hoe, buckets and ropes, digging a well. On August 14, we finally found water at a depth of 14 meters. Just as well we did, as we were beginning to get discouraged. And there was every reason to be discouraged when even at 12 meters the dust was flying! We continued to dig to a depth of 16 meters. Since that time the well has been providing water for all our needs.

Meanwhile, our Bishop insisted that I put the intuition that I carried in writing. I did this and submitted the work to him on Ascension Day 1986. After receiving the work, he wrote me a very nice letter in which he said in substance: "I congratulate you. What you now need to do is to test it. May the Lord help you to carry out your tests successfully...!"

In April 1987, I left for Europe again. From the beginning I had one concern: to find a community that would agree to sponsor us in order to be an external witness of what we were experiencing. I was looking for a community that would understand and respect the originality of our search and approach. The more time went by the more I sensed this need. This all the more because our Bishop always said: "I am not a monk and cannot judge the authenticity of your experience. A monk should come and see what you are doing and write a report before I can decide what I am dealing with".

Already during my trip in 1986 I had made my first contact with Münsterschwarzach. This was Mr. Pabst whom I wish to thank for being my angel Raphael on the roads of Germany. An appointment with Father Fidelis was secured for me. It was a courteous encounter. Nevertheless, I came out of there with the feelings that even though there had been a certain degree of coldness due to the fact that we did not yet know one another, there were nonetheless points on which we agreed. One of the issues we agreed on was the importance we accorded to the *Lectio Divina* and *ruminatio*. During my trip in the summer of 1987 I wanted to strengthen this initial contact. So I returned to the task and was able to clearly articulate my request. Father Abbot Fidelis referred me to Arch-Abbot Notker Wolf of St Ottilien. The one-hour interview was decisive. We made an appointment for autumn of that year, because I was supposed to return to Europe for the opening year of the degree in theology. When I returned at that time, I prevailed upon my bishop to take advantage of his trip to Rome for the Synod on lay people, to visit Münsterschwarzach and support my application, which he did.

In July 1987 we hosted young people from Alsace, Lorraine and Moselle for a New World Event with P. Ernst Klur. Then in August 1987, there was a camp organized by Fr Jose Antonio Rodriguez, a Salesian at Kara, for Peace Makers.

In 1986 and 1987 Fr Dino Ariola SVD was a faithful friend who often visited us and came with so many young people. We extend our deep affection to him. During my visit in the autumn of 1987 I spent a few days in Münsterschwarzach and two weeks in St Ottilien. It was at this time that we were able to fine-tune some long term plans. During this trip in autumn 1987 I also met with Fr Bernardin Schoelenberger. Upon my return to Togo in November I had two pieces of good news with me: one was about Fr Bernardin Schoelenberger's visit scheduled for February 1988 and that of the two Abbots in May 1988. I was happy; everything looked promising, so I allowed myself to dream of greater things.

Unfortunately I was reckoning without the human dimension and especially without the Enemy. A scandal erupted. The Brothers had written to me but in veiled terms. One of my young men had made a young aspiring nun pregnant and this was a tragedy! Everyone was waiting to see if that was what I was teaching them. As things stood, our existence was an issue. It was therefore necessary to make the most of this situation in order to put things in their proper place. I was then told that I should not call what we were doing a monastery. At the very most I could talk about a youth hostel in order not to create doubts in people's minds. Then my analysis of the situation evolved and I asked the Brothers to give thought to the name of 'Fraternité Monastique de l'Incarnation' rather than Monastery of the Incarnation. We understand why our registration reads Monastic Brotherhood of the Incarnation. I think that this situation was providence's way redirecting me back to my initial intuition. This tactical retreat really served my intuition. We expelled the young man. In those circumstances, the Bishop showed such a fatherly attitude that I was comforted. At the beginning of September, Jean was no longer with us. Our numbers had been reduced by two persons. In January 1988, Stéphane Kouvahè left us to return home. If only you could put yourselves in my shoes and know what it feels like when one's world is collapsing! Fortunately two other people were added to the team in Kara at the same time: Julien Amegadzè and Philippe Prezi in September 1987. During the same period two others, Jacques Apollinaire Missihoun and Ephrem Ségbéadji had enrolled at Agbang. But the arrival of new people never consoles one about the loss of those who leave. I should also point out that in the meantime we had constructed two other buildings of the same size as the first one, and that one of these buildings had become our chapel. In the last months of 1987 we started building the "nursery". At the foot of the hill, we built a group of round huts in the Kabiyè style and named them the "nursery" in line with the mystery of the Incarnation. The nursery has since become our hotel. When Father Bernardin arrived on February 6, 1988, we were

hard at work building the nursery with the Fulani Sabi. His visit was a great time of sharing and we are forever grateful for it. This was the "guinea pig" who accepted to simply share our life in full for the first time. He became aware of the life that we lived with our cars and motorbikes, because in the meantime, apart from the minivan, we had acquired an old 404 diesel vehicle. Then after the unexpected death of Antoine Anaté, the brother of our Brother Bernard Anaté, in October 1987, we acquired his motorcycle 100 MB. After his stay, Father Bernardin gave a report on what he saw us go through. He handed this report to our Bishop and Father Abbots Fidelis and Notker.

On April 28, 1988 these two Abbots arrived in Lomé. I was there with P. Litaaba Michel, designated by the Bishop to meet them. A new phase began. In one week, they had embraced the essence of our intuition and realized that we could make common cause. So they extended an invitation to me, since I planned to be in Europe in the autumn of that year for my examinations in Strasbourg. Our Bishop was delighted with this opportunity for us to be affiliated with that Congregation.

In June 1988, Jean-Pierre Boyodi arrived. In October 1988, as God would have it, I was able to go with Bishop Chrétien Bakpessi to present our petition to the General Chapter in St Ottilien. The Chapter voted unanimously to endorse what the board of the congregation had already decided, namely, our acceptance into the congregation at the pre-foundation experimental stage. Guidelines and special by-laws were drawn up to define our relationship during the next four years. Our originality and our specific way of operating were recognized, desired and respected. The concern that the Abbots had insisted on was mainly in the provision of brotherly support, in a relationship of partners drawing mutual enrichment from one another.

A legal remedy was found to enable us to move forward as we waited for the maturation and the canonical establishment of the monastery with a right to have its own novitiate. At our request, November 11th was chosen as the founding date, the Feast of St Martin of Tours ancestor of all the missionary monks. I returned with the good news and Brothers Marc, Jacques and Bernard started their year of probation on Nov. 11, 1988. Father Bernardin had come back to help the brothers in their spiritual formation. He was of great value to us. Serious things were put back on track and we had to sustain the momentum. In January of 1989, Father Fidelis came back to train the Brothers for a month and mutual intensification of our knowledge. On this occasion our Bishop Bakpessi came to spend the night with us on January 16 and 17, 1989, during the Feast of St. Anthony the Hermit. We had a wonderful celebration to mark our entry into the Congregation of St. Ottilien. Fr Jose Antonio Rodriguez, who

concelebrated the mass on that day, was not there by accident. We had always collaborated with him and he came to assist in the training of the brothers very often. This is an opportunity for me to thank him. But we know that the common road goes on and that there is no need to waste time on greetings and thanks.

After the celebration in Agbang, we went to the parish of St Peter and Paul in Kara for a meal with the priests in Kara. This was an opportunity for the Bishop and senior priest Fr Raphael Adjola, to thank Father Fidelis and, through him the entire Congregation for the great service they were providing to the Diocese by agreeing to sponsor this illegitimate child who nevertheless enjoyed their fatherly solicitude. I should point out in passing that in the meantime, on 5th December 1988, with the assistance of the Congregation, we were able to finally get rid of all our old dilapidated cars and buy a 15 places Toyota Hiace minibus. Father Bernardin had already bought us a new scooter during his stay with us in September.

On March 4, 1989, we had a meeting with the entire population of our region. The chief of the region and the village chiefs had in mind to get to know one another and see how they could live together. This was a very positive initiative. As a symbol of our determination to work together in this what the Lord had initiated among them, on that day we started work on the construction of new round huts to accommodate the stream of people who would come to us continually. In July 1989 Marcellin Akonéga joined the community.

In August 1989 we welcomed Fr Joseph, Fr Alexander and a group of students from St. Ottilien in our midst. This meeting was an opportunity for us to engage in a real sharing of our different cultures. Our memories of this encounter are of an experience of great mutual enrichment. I spent the entire month of September in St Ottilien on probation and on 1st October 1989, on the feast of my dearest Saint Therese of the Child Jesus I was able to renew my vows in the Abbey of St. Ottilien.

I returned to my country to prepare for the arrival of Father Archabbot Notker for the commitment of our first three of our brothers. On November 6, 1989, the Archabbot arrived in Lomé. The lector arrived on the 8th, while the acolyte of Father Boniface arrived on the 9th. On November 11, 1989 there was a great celebration to mark the profession of Brothers Mark, Jacques and Bernard. It was a great day for us. The Bishop, who was busy with the consecration of the church of St Martin in Bassar could not be there for the celebration, but he sent us his mitre and his cross for the Archabbot. And as soon as he had finished the

consecration he had left without waiting for the party. He had come to share our joy. This meal prepared by everyone was truly a feast for all, especially the people from the village. The Abbess of Dourgne (France), who was visiting Dzogbégan, made sure that she participated in this celebration. The brothers concerned would be better able to tell us about this festival. We were without a doubt finally in the village. In our search for enculturation in the course of this engagement we gained understanding, sympathy and acceptance from the ordinary people. We therefore needed to weave a new rope to join onto the old one. This we did.

On December 26, 1989, we instituted Christ's Kamou. The Kamou is the big drum used in thanksgiving after a good harvest. Usually only leaders and influential people of the village may have a Kamou day. Since Jesus, whose family we are in this village of Agbang, was accepted and recognized, He deserved to have a day of Kamou. The tradition remains till today: on December 26, Christ's Kamou day at the Monastery of Christ of the Incarnation. Indulge yourself and come and take part in it; you will not be disappointed. Christ is waiting for you and in particular all Christians of the region are waiting to celebrate Christ incarnate. The year 1990 began with a visit from Father Fidelis. During his visit the entry of Brothers Marcellin, Jean-Pierre and Benoit took place and of special note, the profession of our oldest Brother Francis Azoti Agoura as a regular oblate. This happened on January 17 1990. In May 1990, we completed the construction of another building as well as our entrance hall that serves as a gatehouse and refectory. In May 1990, Father Adelrich; Father Prior of the abbey of Uznach in Switzerland arrived. He introduced us to the Holy Scripture in a very nice way. Like our good friends he never got a 'thank you' from us because it would be pointless. The struggle goes on, there is still work to be done there and we are still waiting for him to come back again. The same applies to Fr Paul Schenker of Chaminade, who all year round came once every week to celebrate Mass with us. He never received a thank you because we know we can always have recourse to him whenever necessary; this is also Fr Innocent Pahizi's lot.

During Fr Adelrich's visit on May 20, 1990, we had the pleasure of receiving the Pro Nuncio of Togo Mgr Giuseppe Bertello, accompanied by our Bishop and the Vicar General, Fr Ignace S. Talkèna. He told us to be a light to the region and the country. In July 1990, we held a Summer Camp with 17 young French persons who had come from Machy (the Cultural Office of Cluny), 4 Burkinabé and about fifteen young people from the region, as well as the brothers from our community. Thus was an intensive month during which we worked, lived and

shared together. It was great! We planted 1200 plants; currently they are a pleasure to see and are providing shade. We mainly dug the foundations of a new building to close the rectangle and so give our home the appearance of a cloister. One can also say that the monastic life was planted in some hearts during that summer camp. Indeed, Nicolas Yaméogo from Burkina Faso learned about the monastic life in this way and allowed himself to be challenged by it. During the camp, we witnessed my Deacon's ordination in Sokodé, together with three other senior seminarians on July 14, 1990. At the end of August 1990, Brothers, Marc, Jacques Bernard, Fr. Ignatius, the Vicar General and I left for Europe. The three brothers were going to spend a whole year in Münsterschwarzach for various professional training courses. Our Vicar General accompanied us on behalf of our Bishop to show how much the diocese appreciated the help of the Congregation. It can be said of them as was said of Ulysses: "Happy are those who like Ulysses have travelled widely and returned full of years and experience." Jacques learned goldsmithing, blacksmithing and Marc Bernard sewing. Currently they are the pillars of the community. When I returned in late October, we began the construction of the building whose foundation we had dug and of a new chapel. We also began preparations for the profession of three brothers: Marcellin, Benoit and Jean-Pierre. 1991 began with the visit of Fr Abbot Fidelis, as 1990 had done. During this visit, Brothers Innocent, Julien and Pamphile entered the novitiate and the profession of the three Brothers Marcellin, Benoît and Jean-Pierre took place on January 19. On August 19th 1991, I flew to Frankfurt. I was pleased to find the three brothers at the airport and in their respective workshops and to find that in one year they had learned so much and so well! At the end of August, my retreat in Neuburg was a great experience for me and especially the discovery of a spiritual path: eight days alone in a cell with the God who had called me. This retreat was preparing me for my ordination to the priesthood in St Ottilien which took place on 21 September 1991, on the feast of St. Matthew with three colleagues from St Ottilien and Bishop Joseph Stimfle , Bishop of Augsburg presiding.

It is better to jealously keep secret all that I went through, experienced, felt and understood on that occasion, it's too much for me and I still have not finished digesting it. Will I ever finish it? I hope not. On Thursday, September 26, 1991, I experienced something very beautiful that I had always desired: being sent on mission following the presentation of the missionaries' cross. Yes, that morning Archabbot Notker was sending me, as he sends many other colleagues, on mission. He sent me not to a distant unknown, unfamiliar people, but rather to my own home country among my brothers as a missionary. I was ordained on the feast of St. Matthew who as an Apostle and Evangelist to the people of his

own Jewish tradition already had this meaning for me. This mission was in keeping with the principle of inculturation, which is a key commitment of our brotherhood of the Incarnation. On September 29th, I experienced another event that I beg your indulgence not to speak about as it was great, beautiful and unexpected. This was my first Mass at Retzwiller in my adopted village in Alsace. On October 3, 1991, in the presence of all the Abbot Presidents of the Benedictine congregations who form the Benedictine Confederation and in the presence of the Abbot Primate, Victor Dammertz, I celebrated my first Mass at Münsterschwarzach. What a grace of Providence: the illegitimate child becomes the pampered and beloved son! With my bags and especially my heart so full of so many graces, memories and experiences I returned home with three other brothers, on 11th October 1991.

We barely had a month to prepare for another great event, the canonical erection of the Monastery and my solemn profession. It was conducted on November 9, 1991. Father Archabbot and Fr. Basilius Doppelfeld came for the occasion.

Should we not say: "This whole story should be read and reviewed with the background of thanksgiving"?

Yes, thanksgiving to God who had allowed the birth of this new monastic cell in the midst of His people in Togo. Thanksgiving also for all the people who in one way or another have been instruments of Divine Providence in His work among us.

You are very many, you about whom I have not said anything, simply because you have your place in the heart's memory. We have been involved in this adventure with you from the beginning, and I want to tell you that together with you we are confident that we could continue to say yes to the One who wants us to belong completely to Him."

Brother Boniface Tiguilu osb

By Way of Conclusion

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ!

Here we are at the construction site. You can see for yourself that construction is in progress. We had wanted to finish this cloister before the feast, to show you a well-appointed setting. But, thanks to God - we did not succeed. It is still

under construction. And I really like that. This incomplete cloister, this cloister under construction reflects the current situation of this community of Agbang. A building site is reminiscent of a scenario where we have not yet arrived, where we are still on the way. A building site is a place of hard work where everyone has to give of himself, in spite of the scorching sun and the rain that bathes us.

A building site is also a place where something evolves and continues to develop. . The progress in this building site that can be seen step by step, demonstrates that the work is worth the effort, and that we can gradually take delight in the fruits of this work courageously undertaken.

A building site is therefore a place that is full of life and a symbol of life itself, a symbol of the dynamism of life. Brother Roger from Taizé has published a book entitled: "The dynamics of the temporary". Each unfinished thing evokes and provokes the dynamics of life, in order to continue and grow.

This is why, my dear brothers from Agbang, I hope with all my heart that your building site will never be finished, yes, never finished! Neither the outer nor inner parts of the site, the community building site as well as each person's interior within each site. If one day you say, "Now we have arrived, now everything is done, you may sit down and rest.

"My brothers! That day would be the beginning of the fall and ruin of your community.

Today is a day of celebration and rest, a joyful day.

A party at the construction site, a party that will renew strength and confidence - to continue the job tomorrow with greater dynamism. So, my brothers, stay on course! Stay on the building site with the Lord forever - in the dynamics of love and the new life.

Now I want to say a few introductory words about the core aspect of this celebration: that is the solemn profession or perpetual profession of the three brothers.

Solemn profession or perpetual profession! Perpetual!

So in the interim situation of this project, today we are celebrating something called 'perpetual', a thing that will last until eternity. It is a decisive and definitive commitment. The three brothers arrived after a long journey with many ups and downs, with much suffering and joy. The path of training with all its temporary nature has ended. We make a definitive or even permanent commitment.

However we must not be deceived by words. Having arrived! Doing something permanent! What does that mean in concrete terms? Look at these brothers, Marc, Jacques and Bernard! We know one another. Do you think they have already reached monastic perfection? Do you think we can leave them at the current level in their lives - leave them at their current level forever? No! Never!

Well, I have known these three brothers for seven years. During these seven years they made a lot of efforts to mature at all levels and they have made much progress. Congratulations. I really appreciate that. But there is still much more. If one looks at these brothers objectively, one can say that they do not look much like a finished work but more like a construction site where hard work is still going on. This is a project that will continue till the end of their lives - it is therefore a perpetual construction site where work will continue, so to speak.

Brother Marc as a perpetual building site!

Brother Jacques as a perpetual building site!

Brother Bernard as a perpetual building site!

This image fits in very well with the actual circumstances of their lives. Having a site where one always experiences the joy of growing and maturing but where every step opens up new areas that provide the challenge of conquering them at all costs.

In other words, one can understand the perpetual profession as the entry into a continuous learning process, in which one is in a relentless search throughout one's lifetime: How to get to an increasingly deeper love for God and how to learn to love all one's brothers more and more - all for the improvement of the work of the community.

This profession as entry into a lifelong learning!

But then, what was the time of formation preceding that step?

The time before the perpetual profession is just a test to determine whether the candidate is ready and capable of increasingly deeper lifelong learning. If a candidate is considered to be one who wants to arrive as early as possible so as to sit and rest as soon as possible, this one will have no chance of entering into lifelong learning: So, my brothers, you were found worthy to enter into this lifelong learning, beginning today: Congratulations!

Entry into a lifelong learning!

Is that reason enough for such a great celebration that we are going to hold? During the sacrament of the profession I will ask the three brothers the question: Are you ready for an unqualified yes? They will probably say: Yes! This is awesome! An unqualified yes! it is rare in our world: A Yes on which to build a life, without being deceived: Perhaps, such a Yes is worthy of a feast: But I would like to celebrate such a Yes not so much at the beginning but rather at the end of it, when the results of this perpetual learning can be seen. Nevertheless today the issue is that of a greater "Yes". In the second letter to the Corinthians we heard that Christ is God's Yes for us, in which there is no 'No'. So God has said 'Yes' to us without a 'No'! – an unqualified 'Yes'! And today He is saying it explicitly to our three brothers. So today two 'Yeses' are converging and the decisive point is exactly where they meet, and it is from this that the spirit of today's feast will break forth. But the two 'Yeses' are not equal. I would like to describe the 'Yes' of God in large letters and the brothers' 'yes' in small letters because it is the Yes of God that is the most important and the basis and source of everything. This Yes of God will be incarnated in a visible way today - like a tattoo on the chest of the three brothers. This tattoo is the seal of the Lamb or the "seal of the Father and of the Lamb," as the book of Revelation says. And the seal means that "this man is marked by God", God has written His name on the man, saying, "Now you are mine, my property. Today I pronounce an unqualified Yes to you and on your whole life".

And this sign of God is etched into the flesh of the brothers, not only as a spiritual word. The flesh itself is marked by the name of God to say, without a doubt, that even the brothers' flesh belongs totally and exclusively to the Lord. That means, among other things, a life of celibacy. It is odd that in St Benedict's case the celibate life is not mentioned explicitly in the profession formula. It is only many centuries later that the formula of the 'so-called "Three Evangelical Counsels was established».

However, it is clear that the St Benedict monastic commitment always includes the celibate life, which is the very basis of monastic life. Already the word "monk" means "alone": to be alone, to belong to God alone - body and soul, flesh and blood. This is why the famous Latin American religious man and poet Ernesto Cardenal said: "Every cell in the body of the monk and every particle of his being is nuptial, must prepare itself for a marriage, for the Marriage of the Lamb". These are big words, solemn words, but rather a daily and continuous challenge for the entire life of a monk.

That is it, Brothers Mark, Jacques and Bernard!

Now it becomes even clearer why the monk's life should be one of perpetual learning - until every cell in your body every particle of your being is

transformed into love and light. God chose you not because you are perfect men, but because he felt the desire to put his hand upon you, to transform and shape you throughout your lives, relentlessly unreservedly.

This process of formation and transformation is well expressed in a text by St. Irenaeus written in the second century, that I will read to you, in conclusion:

“You, O man, are a work of God, you are like clay in His hands. Therefore wait time for the hand of God, your artist, wait for His hand that does all things at the right time, the proper timer for you who are being formed. Offer Him a malleable heart, and keep the shape that the artist has already given you. Hold on to humility so that you do not become hard, then the marks of His hands will no longer be able to form you further. Remain wet and malleable and God will form you to the perfection and beauty that has always been planned for you!”

Dear brothers and sisters! This text does not only apply to our three brothers. It also relates to us all. Therefore I will repeat it and each one of us can listen to this text as if it was said to her or to him personally: “You, O man you are... for all time” Amen

Father Abbot Fidelis osb

Abbot of Münsterschwarzach, Germany, for the:
10 years' Celebration of the Monastery and
Solemn Profession of the First Three Brothers!
Agbang, August 6, - 1995