March 14, 2008

Dear Family and Friends,

I hope this letter finds all of you all well.

For those of you who may be hearing from me for the first time, this is the latest in a series of email updates from the mission here in Togo that I send out occasionally to people who in one way or another have found their way onto my email list.

I’m not technically advanced enough to have an “unsubscribe” button, but I don’t want to impose these mailings on anyone, so if you prefer not to receive them I’ll remove you from the list if you just send me a brief reply to that effect. On the other hand, those who may wish to take a look at the earlier mailings (October 2006 and April 2007) can find them at the following links: www.strose.com/files/Fr-Ryan-Mission-ltr-10-18-06.pdf and http://www.estovir.org/NewsandEvents/LatestNews/tabid/132/articleType/ArticleView/ArticleID/25/PageID/9/Default.aspx

I’m eager to tell you about so much that has happened here in the last few months.

Resignation of the Archbishop and Setting of Parish Boundaries

Last June the Pope finally accepted the resignation of Philippe Kpodzro, the beloved Archbishop of Lomé, at age 77. I have known him for thirty-three years, since my time in the Peace Corps. It was he who invited me to undertake missionary service in Togo. Some of you met him when he visited the U.S. on two occasions in recent years. What wonderful years of service he gave to the Church! Shortly after my return to Togo last August after a home visit, Denis Amuzu-Dzakpah was ordained as his successor, only the third Togolese to hold that position. I have known him also for a few years and he is very supportive of the mission.

Last November the new Archbishop finally set the boundaries for the new mission parish of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Atchanvè. So, now it’s official – I am pastor of a parish covering a huge rural area that includes over three dozen villages, of which fifteen are “secondary stations”. A secondary station is a village with a catechist who leads at least a few people in prayer each Sunday. A lot of those stations have makeshift chapels made of sticks and thatch, such as in the photo on the left. We would love to replace those structures, one by one, with chapels like the one in the photo on the right. We also hope to build chapels in the other villages where there is no place of worship at all yet, after turning them into secondary stations by founding Catholic communities and training catechists to serve there.
To give you an idea of the parish, I have placed it on a map of Togo – it’s the small red area in the southwestern part of the country. The actual size of the parish relative to the country is probably a bit smaller than what you see, but really not by too much.

The map on the right shows the boundaries of the parish and most of the villages. The secondary stations are underlined in red. It takes at least an hour and a half to drive from one end of the parish to the other over the bad roads in my Toyota pickup.

To keep in touch with all the villages, our meetings here in Atchanvé every first Friday with all the catechists are important. These meetings are for the catechists’ formation, but we also discuss parish-related matters and set up the schedule of the next month’s visits to their villages for Mass.
My Brother Peter’s Visit and the Guadalupe Celebration

This past Christmas was great because my brother Peter (Fr. Peter Ryan, S. J., for those of you who don’t know him) spent it with me here. He is on sabbatical leave this year from Mt. St. Mary’s Seminary in Emmitsburg, MD where he teaches moral theology, and so was able to make the trip and stay for a couple of weeks. He arrived in time for our patronal celebration of Our Lady of Guadalupe held on Sunday, December 16. Hundreds of people came from the secondary stations, with many arriving on Saturday. There was a choir competition on Saturday night followed by an all-night Eucharistic vigil. Below are photos of the procession before the Mass on Sunday and the theatrical reenactment of the apparitions of Our Lady of Guadalupe, which is staged each year by the youth from a different village. This year it was the kids from Avegan. (We’ll have to work a bit on the bishop’s miter next time!)
I’m also delighted to report that we now have the first child in the village (maybe the first in Togo?) to be named Juan Diego, in honor of the saint to whom Our Lady of Guadalupe appeared. It is common for Togolese Catholic families to name their child after the saint whose feast day is the child’s birth date. This child was born on December 8, so had it been a girl, she would probably have been “Immaculée”, but when I pointed out to his parents that the recently canonized Saint Juan Diego’s feast day was the next day, that clinched it for them. I told them if they liked they could call him “Yohanes Yakobo”, which are the translations in the Ewe New Testament of John (Juan) and James (Diego), but they decided with no hesitation to go with the original Spanish. It is said that after the apparitions, St. Juan Diego spent the rest of his life telling others about Jesus and his mother. Let’s pray that our little Togolese Juan Diego will grow up to be a great saint and evangelizer like his heavenly patron.

On December 23, Peter and I celebrated Mass together at Amavégan, one of the villages that was recently added to this parish. The people had not had a visit from a priest for Mass in almost a year. Here is a photo of most of the 48 children that we baptized during the Mass. I did the first 38, and Peter did the last 10 – in Ewe no less, reading from the ritual book and doing his best to imitate my less than perfect accent.
Water and Evangelization in Tsati

All of the parish villages are poor, but one of the very poorest is Tsati, which you can see on the map in the southeast area of the parish. Here is a picture of the chief sitting in front of his hut. You may be able to enlarge the view to see his right hand, with some fingers missing as a result of leprosy he had as a child. Leprosy is not common here, but it is not unknown.

Tsati is almost completely pagan, with only a handful of baptized persons. At the entrance to Tsati there is even a shrine with a fetish “guarding” the village. I was wondering how I was going to get a toehold to evangelize there, when it occurred to me to ask about their water situation. They showed me a pump that has been broken for over a year, with no funds to replace it. Before the pump was installed by a Japanese group in 2000, there had been a terrible problem with Guinea worm, but that was gradually eliminated. Now, however, they were back to drinking, at least in the dry season, the filthy water that you can see in this photo. I was told that they do at least filter the water by pouring it through a cloth before drinking it.
I told them I would see what I could do. And God is good! Shortly afterwards I received an email from a priest friend back home who said a couple he knew wanted to make a contribution to the mission, and asked what the needs were. I sent him a list, and they chose to help out the people in Tsati, by replacing their broken pump with a new solar pump that would use energy collected from two solar panels to send water to a mounted 5000 liter tank, to which a pipe and faucet would be attached. The next photo shows the work in progress. I am told that in the next week or so the job will be finished and they will have a system in place with very few moving parts, one that should last many years.

But the best thing about this was that a delegation from Tsati visited Atchanvé to thank me and to tell me that “now all the people in our village want to follow you!” I considered tearing my garments like Paul and Barnabas did in Acts 14:14, but I settled for explaining to them that the one they really wanted to follow was Jesus, and I assured them that I would definitely be visiting them again to tell them all about him and his Church. Clean water will be wonderful for the villagers in Tsati, but it is infinitely more important for them to discover the living water Christ speaks of, and to believe his promise that that whoever drinks of it will never thirst again but it will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life (Jn. 4:13-14). That living water is God’s own life that they are called to share forever as his beloved children.

**Fires in Wodomé and Klokpoé**

Towards the end of the long dry season in southern Togo, which usually lasts from November to March., the farmers will often set fire to the brush in their fields in order to avoid the backbreaking labor of clearing it out with machetes before they do their planting in anticipation of the rains. This can be dangerous for houses with thatch roofs, since it doesn’t take much wind to carry a small bit of burning brush quite a distance into a village, and when one roof catches fire it easily spreads to others. That’s what happened in the Wodomé and
Klokpoé, where a total of 64 homes caught fire and over 200 people were displaced. The next photo shows a man in Wodomé standing in front of his destroyed house.

We sent word to all the secondary stations to announce that there would be a collection of food, clothing and other items for the families the following Sunday, and then on Tuesday a few of us spent a good part of the day in the truck making a tour of the parish to pick up everything and haul it to Wodomé and Klokpoé. The people rose to the occasion with the little they have, sending sacks of raggedy clothes and piles of yams, cassava and corn they had grown for their own families. It was inspiring to watch the very poor help the very poor. We know that there is no evil that God can’t draw good from, and something like this can help the villages in our parish to grow in love and unity: “If one member suffers, all suffer together . . .” (1 Cor. 2:26). In Wodomé and Klokpoé the neighbors have been pitching in to help the families rebuild their homes and put their lives back together.

**Progress on the dispensary and convent**

As a lot of you know, a medical dispensary for the mission has been in the works for a long time. We delayed beginning the construction until we could combine it with the building of a house for some Togolese Notre Dame de l’Église nuns who will then move here and run the dispensary. Building both together also saves us money on the transport of materials. Three Sisters are set to come this year and if all goes well then a fourth in 2009. Two will operate the dispensary and the others will help with different parish tasks such as religious education and youth work.
Both buildings are finally taking shape, as you can see from the next two photos. The first is of the dispensary, which is a bit further along, and the second shows the walls of the convent rising. The construction is being supervised by a contractor whose wife is from this village. He is the same one who built the mission center where I live. Most of the workers are paid a very modest salary, but there are also volunteers from the village who regularly help, especially with tasks such as hauling water for mixing the cement.
With a lot of hard work and generosity, St. Martin’s Church in Gaithersburg, our sister parish in the U.S., organized the shipment of two forty-foot containers with solar panels, medical equipment and many other items for both of these buildings and for other needs. The first container arrived a few months ago, and when the second arrives (it’s on a ship in the Atlantic as I write this) with all the solar batteries and other equipment, we should be able to solar energize the dispensary, the convent and the mission center, as well as the pumps in the two small-bore wells for the village’s water system, which will also supply the two buildings under construction.

Finally, as always, the mission needs your help. Most important are your prayers and sacrifices. They will remain a secret between you and our Lord, who I have no doubt will show you when you get to heaven what marvelous things he did with them. Please consider a donation also, since all these projects are expensive as you can imagine, and there is so much other good that can be done with your support. Please feel free to pass this update along to others who might be able to help. Our tax-exempt status is still pending, but contributions are already legally tax-deductible and can be sent to:

Togo Mission  
P.O. Box 130  
Gaithersburg, MD 20884-0130

I am so grateful to everyone who has already contributed – and please know that the people here are also. I attach one last photo for your enjoyment. It was taken in front of the mission center storage area after the people helped to unload the first container. It’s their way of saying thanks to all of you who have helped so generously both spiritually and materially. You can see you have a lot of friends here in Togo!

Yours in Christ,

Father William Ryan