

Youth Volunteers for Mission

by Brother Manuel Magaz FSC

What follows is a brief account of the youth volunteer program in Equatorial Guinea for which I have been the co-ordinator for nine years. Those involved in this program were generally of university age over 20, although others were accepted, provided they had suitable experience. The locations, aims and activities of the various projects were set up by Religious of the Spanish Federation of Religious Educators (FERE), working in Equatorial Guinea. At the appropriate time, they would communicate with me as secretary of FERE, in Madrid, giving details of their plans. I would then set out to find volunteers, prepare them and organise their journey. The process was rather complex, and it relied heavily on the collaboration of the religious institutes with which those participating in the various programs were connected.

The volunteers were well informed and they were aware of the commitment and sacrifice that their participation in the Equatorial Guinea programs would entail.

1. The programs take place during the summer vacation, when the volunteers could be enjoying a well-deserved break.
2. They must accept the risks involved in travelling to a third-world country, including the danger of tropical diseases.
3. They have to live in the jungle without light, plumbing or showers, in tremendous heat, with mosquitoes, living on a diet of plain food, most which is canned.
4. They know from past experiences that some volunteers succumb to malaria.
5. They must follow a preparation course, before they leave for Equatorial Guinea.
6. They will be working with people who are both uneducated and poor. The working day will be 10 hours or more.
7. To crown it all, they must pay for their own return airfare, which at current rates is approximately \$1,000).

As one of the volunteers said: "My worst problem this year is lack of money. I don't know if I'll be able to come up with enough to pay for the trip. It took me a long time to save enough for the ticket last year. I've begun saving to go back there again, but I'm afraid that it won't be enough. I'll just have to accept this" (José Pablo Hernandez, Granada).

In spite of these difficulties, the response of the young people remained positive. Applications increased year after year, and they came from all over Spain. One year, more than 170 applied. The number of volunteers was always greater than the places available.

As secretary, I conducted numerous personal interviews, in the course of which I asked the candidates why they wanted to volunteer for the program. While not discounting the element of adventure, most of them replied in terms of commitment, solidarity and rejection of the consumer society. More than a few referred to Gospel values. I also have in my files many written communications, in which the applicants state their reasons for applying. These deserve to be remembered, and what follows is a representative sample. I have arranged them into three groups. They may be repetitive in places; but it is better to retain the flavour of the original words of the applicants. Each has his or her own particular slant, and the similarities just underline the fact that the same ideals are found in different parts of Spain. Some are looking for a temporary experience, while others see this as a way towards a more permanent commitment.

Group I: emphasising commitment, altruism, sharing with others.

- I am not asking to know exactly what I will have to do, since what I want is to serve others for a period of time. How I do this does not matter. (Pilar Diez, aged 21, Valladolid)
- I do not have a lot to offer professionally, since I am just an assistant nurse. But the best things I have to offer are my hands and my heart, which are ready for anything. (María Dolores Sánchez, Murcia)

- Perhaps you will ask me what my motives are. Maybe you think that I am the naïve type who wants to solve the world's problems, a sort of Indiana Jones for our time. Nothing could be further from reality. I only want to share experiences with others, especially by working for others. (Alfredo Espada, Albacete)
- This year, I am thinking of leaving my country and "taking the plunge" in other lands for the reason I mentioned already: to help my brothers and sisters in any way I can. (Abel Díaz, aged 20, Pamplona)
- We want to share everything with others, giving of ourselves and being of service to others. (A group of young people from Granada)

Group II: emphasising dedication, service, those in need, the poor.

- I would like to devote the month of August to serving those in need in the Third World. I will pay for my trip. My preference is to work with children. But this does not mean I would not be willing to take care of old people or the sick. (Esther García, Badalona)
- I have always thought about working in the Third World with those most in need. I think that my personal fulfilment as a man lies in being dedicated to the poor. This would involve me in a type of human enrichment, being at the fringe of this consumer society which surrounds us. (Jose Córdoba, aged 26, Nueva Cartagena)
- I am a 25-year old woman from Vitoria, and this year I am working as a volunteer in a deprived area of Málaga. I would like to have first hand experience of deprivation and devote myself to the cause of the poor. (Blanca Eraña, Malaga)
- I would like to do all I can to devote my life to those people who are in such need. (Jaqueline Ortega, aged 20, Fuerteventura).
- I am ready to do anything, whatever is needed most, to help those who are most in need. (Lluís Carbó, aged 25, Navarra).
- I am a teacher who wants to be useful for those in need, for humanitarian reasons. I want to travel to Third World countries to teach children and adults to read and write. (José Manuel Jiménez, San Sebastian).
- The world of the needy causes us concern, and we want to share something with them. (María Jesús Matos, aged 20, and María Carmen Fernández, aged 27, San Jaun de Sahagún, Leon).

Group III: emphasizing social and Gospel mission.

- I have a great missionary concern, and I want to experience working in the Third World. (María Luisa Martínez, teacher, Cordoba)
- I am excited about the work either in Bioko or Mbini. I would like to work in the missions for some time. (Olegario Ollero, aged 31, Zaragoza).
- My desire to go on a mission grows day by day. Even though I cannot do it permanently, I would like to do it for two months at least. (Sister Esperanza Abad, Miajadas. Cáceres).
- I would like to spend a part of my life on the missions, even though it may be only for a time. I would like to live out the message of Jesus to love in a radical way. I would like to give my best. (Alejandro Martínez, aged 20, Vitoria)
- My greatest dream is to spend the month in helping people in need. It does not matter to me where or in what conditions. I feel that I am a fairly strong person, with a strong faith in God who helps me. Consequently, I want to share my good fortune and help out a little bit. I would like to know what it takes to be a missionary. (Tatania Díaz, aged 20, Santander).

- The missions have been attracting me for some years now. (Emilia Pinto, Madrid)
- During my entire life I have dreamed of being a missionary. I have requested this several times and have been turned down. Now that I have been offered the chance, even though it is only a glimpse of the missions, I consider it a piece of good fortune and a precious grace from God. (Juan Nicasio Martínez, Astorga).
- I am 24 years old. I work full time and I would like to go to the Missions. They have attracted me since I was a little girl; but the basic reason for my not going has been a lack of information about where to turn to for help. (María Pilar Espinosa, Jaen).
- I have always had the idea of going to the Missions to help out those in need, and I resolved to get myself ready to go someday. (María Francisca Meca, aged 26, university graduate, Granada).

From these quotes it is clear that young people are motivated by and are willing to make sacrifices for enterprises that do not reflect the interest of a materialistic, capitalist society. Young people opt for the missions in spite of the sacrifices they are required to make. There are many young people who are dissatisfied with the consumer society and are looking for ways of being in solidarity with persons in need and helping them. I estimate that, in the summer programs which I co-ordinated, more than 800 young people participated from all over the country. Quite a few of them repeated the experience two or three times. There is a lack of concrete information available to young people about organisations through which they can channel their altruistic concerns. A good number of them made this clear during the interviews and also in writing.

(Adapted from *Lasalliana* No 53)