



February 2023

**ENCOUNTER**  
*Catholics on Mission – Everywhere*

## Mission is the Presence of Christ



It's a long way from Kenya to the U.S., but a missionary always goes where she's sent. For Sr. Helen Murage, that place is Vineland, New Jersey, between Philadelphia and the shore. It's a humble old town in the Diocese of Camden, not the likeliest place to find a community of African nuns.

But these particular nuns – the Sisters of Mary Immaculate of Nyeri – are educators and nurses. When one of them traveled to the U.S. in 1999 to pursue further studies, she happened to meet the then-bishop of Camden, who had a need for sisters with healthcare experience to staff a nursing home. She and her sisters responded.



Today, in the U.S., they number 18, primarily in New Jersey but with a few in Brooklyn and Queens, and are known as the Sisters of Mary Immaculate of Nyeri, USA Delegation. The larger congregation has about 450 members, mostly serving in Africa. There, they staff and provide administration for 18 primary schools, five secondary schools, and three skill-development centers that provide vocational training throughout East Africa. Additionally, they maintain three orphanages, three hospitals and several clinics in the region to provide opportunities for the poorest young men and women of Africa.



"I always tell people that some years back, America was sending missionaries to different parts of the world, and now I feel it is the time for us to give back," says Sr. Helen, who first came to the U.S. in 2005. "I'm a missionary in this country. We are now the people who are coming back to experience the mission here."

Sr. Helen ministers as a registered nurse in a long-term care facility. A number of her sisters also work there as nurses or chaplains. Vivacious and with a charming musical accent, she speaks with great passion about her purpose-filled days.

"There is so much sadness in the world," she says, including for many of the older people she cares for, who often feel forgotten and unloved. "In the facilities where we work, many elderly people have no family. When I'm there, I am the family they identify with. I can give them the needed love "

Sr. Helen's vocation came to her in a dream, when she was a child, but she had to wait to finish her schooling before

*Top: Sr. Helen (left) at her final profession*

*Middle: Celebrating Graduation Day with IHM Sisters*

*Bottom: The Sisters of Mary Immaculate of Nyeri, USA Delegation at their convent in Vineland, New Jersey*

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entering religious life in 1997. Eight years later, she was sent to the U.S., to experience missionary life with other sisters working in a nursing home in the Diocese of Camden.

Vivacious and gregarious, she tells of being so shy and afraid at first that no one would understand her accent, she could hardly speak! But she had to give a mission appeal at a parish nonetheless. A kind American told her, “Don’t worry, sister, the Holy Spirit will sit on your shoulders and speak on your behalf. Your presence is the most important.”

She tells the story with a laugh, recalling that she didn’t end up saying much. The congregation saw her and understood the mission she represented.

“We keep our habit. Like a policeman, wherever I go, people still know that I’m a nun,” she says, laughing again. “Just being there, like our blessed mother. She used to say very few words, but people knew that she was there. Her presence was felt.”

Sr. Helen speaks of the full spectrum of care that her congregation provides, from educating children to caring for the dying. “It just fits so well, to have the privilege of walking with people from the time they are young until when they are transitioning from this world to the next.”

In the convent where she lives, sisters pray together morning, evening and at night; share in meal preparation and chores; and spice things up with songs in their native language, Kikuyu. Their Delegate Superior lives with them, and their Mother Superior visited recently for two months from Kenya, meeting with all of the sisters, checking in with their ministries, providing spiritual care and guidance.

Sr. Helen visited Kenya last year — sisters in mission lands are allowed to visit their families and country every three years. She misses her homeland, but the joy of being a missionary and sharing Christ’s love bring a contentment that cannot be easily explained.

“Mission is about presence. When we first came here, our host bishop challenged us to bear in mind that many people can become nurses or teachers, but few are called to religious life. We are 24/7 religious women,” she says. “Wherever I am, I strive to always remember that I am the presence that many see, a Christ bearer, and it’s far beyond anything else I could ever desire!”

*Article by Julie Bourbon, ENCOUNTER Editor*



*Top: Archbishop Anthony Muheria of Nyeri visited the sisters during a recent trip to the United States.*

*Middle: Sisters at the March for Life with Bishop Dennis Sullivan of the Diocese of Camden, New Jersey.*

*Bottom: Sr. Helen (right) at the 2022 USCMA Convention, with Deacon Matt Dulka and Fr. Yesu Mulakaleti.*

You can learn more about the sisters at <https://www.msomi.org/>.

## **SHARE YOUR MISSION EVENTS**

Send the details including dates, locations and links to Don McCrabb at [dmccrabb@uscatholicmission.org](mailto:dmccrabb@uscatholicmission.org) or submit online via the form at <https://uscatholicmission.org/mission-events-submission-form>.

***USCMA is a community  
of faith leaders engaged in  
networking, formation, and advocacy  
for God’s mission.***



## Remembering Pope Benedict

By Don McCrabb

Executive Director, United States Catholic Mission Association

After Pope Emeritus Benedict died on December 31, 2022, the period of mourning as he lay in state inside St. Peter's, and his funeral on January 5, I wanted to get a sense of his leadership in mission. Rather than rely on impressions, I decided to reread his World Mission Day messages in order to gain some insight into his approach to mission. I was surprised and pleased by what I found and humbled by the journey.

For each message, there is always a theme, perhaps an anniversary or special occasion for a particular year, a call to action, and an affirmation of the work of the Pontifical Missionary Societies. It is interesting to notice the other popes quoted. Pope John Paul II, for example, is the only pope Pope Benedict quotes in all his messages.

For his first mission message in 2006, Pope Benedict's theme was "Charity: soul of the mission." He pulls from his own reflections on charity, giving a history of divine love that is embodied in the missionary who stoops down to the needs of all because "those who love with Christ's Heart do not seek their own interests but the glory of the Father and the good of their neighbor alone." The call to action, given to "everyone," is to understand that this love is the "soul of mission."

"All the Churches for all the world," his theme for 2007, was shaped by the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of *Fidei Donum* by Pope Pius XII. Here, he specifically addresses "the local Churches of every continent" and calls them to "relaunch missionary action in the face of the many serious challenges of our time." He talks about being co-responsible, communion among Churches, "reciprocal help," and inter-Church cooperation.

Pope Benedict's message for 2008 was issued in the Pauline Year and framed the theme, "Servants and Apostles of Christ Jesus." He addresses bishops, priests, religious, and lay people and urges confidence undiminished by fear. He reminds bishops they are consecrated not only for their dioceses, but "for the salvation of the whole world."

"The nations will walk in its light" (Rev 21:24), the theme for 2009, stresses the goal of mission, to "illumine all peoples with the light of the Gospel." Mission is not to extend the Church's power or dominion but to "lead all people to Christ." Pope Benedict stresses that the Kingdom the Church serves is not of this world but is "in this world and within its history a force for justice and peace, for true freedom and respect for the dignity of every human person."

Given the current Eucharistic Revival here in the United States, Pope Benedict's message for 2010 is prophetic. The theme was "Building Ecclesial Communion is the Key to Mission." He quotes his Apostolic Exhortation, *Sacramentum caritatis*: "The love that we

# GO FORTH

**ANIMATING THE CALL TO MISSION EVERY SUNDAY**

**THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 16, 2-3:30 PM EASTERN TIME**

Every Sunday, Jesus, our Risen Lord, beckons us to mission through the Sunday Readings. How do we amplify that message? How do we demonstrate that reality through the lives of missionaries? How do we explore that message with other disciples of all ages and experience?

In this webinar we will explore those questions by introducing "Go Forth" - a new initiative to amplify, proclaim, and explore the call to mission. "Go Forth" is made possible, in part, by a generous grant from the Catholic Communications Campaign.

**Register at <https://bit.ly/Animate-Mission-Every-Sunday>**

**or visit**

**[www.uscatholicmission.org](http://www.uscatholicmission.org)**

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celebrate in the sacrament is not something we can keep to ourselves. By its very nature it demands to be shared with everyone.” He goes on to say that “an authentically Eucharistic Church is a missionary Church.”

In 2011, Pope Benedict relies, for the second time, on scripture for his theme, “As the Father has sent me, even so I send you” (John 20:21). He stresses and develops co-responsibility for mission, which is essential to the Church. “It is important that both individual baptized people and ecclesial communities be involved in mission, not sporadically or occasionally but in a constant manner, as a form of Christian life.”

On October 11, 2011, Pope Benedict issued *Porta Fidei*, calling for a “year of faith” beginning October 4, 2012 and ending November 24, 2013 to recognize and celebrate the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the opening of the Second Vatican Council. Pope Benedict’s “World Mission *Day* Message” for 2012 drew its theme, “Called to radiate the World of truth,” from his Apostolic Letter. In this, his final message, the title shifted to “Day” rather than “Sunday.”

It was both moving and surprising to see how Pope Benedict anticipates *Joy of the Gospel* in his 2012 message. “Today too, the mission *ad gentes* must be the constant horizon and paradigm of every ecclesial endeavor.” This mission is rooted in an encounter with Christ as a “living Person, who satisfies the thirst of the heart,” and proceeds to the pure, unambiguous core of “kerygma.” God’s absolute and total love for every man and every woman culminated in sending Jesus, his only begotten Son, who took on the poverty of our human nature, to “love it and redeeming it from sin and death through the offering of himself on the Cross.”

In remembering Pope Benedict, it occurs to me how much I do not know of the man. Fr. Tom Reese, SJ, was so struck by Joseph Ratzinger’s holiness that he asked for his blessing at the conclusion of one of his interviews. Pope Francis, in *Joy of Gospel*, quotes perhaps Pope Benedict’s most famous line, “Being a Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction” (*Joy of the Gospel*, para 7).

It is good to remember the man and his papacy. May we learn from his mistakes and blind spots, and rely on his wisdom. For myself, I commend Pope Emeritus Benedict to the tender mercies of our God, mourn his passing, and long to celebrate more of his wisdom.

## Happenings

### **Texas Mission Conference: Revitalizing Mission at Home and Abroad February 24-26, 2023, San Antonio, Texas.**

The Texas Mission Council hosts an annual meeting at the Oblate Retreat Center in San Antonio. To learn more about the conference, the speakers, and for registration information, visit their website at

<https://txmissioncouncil.org/> or Google “Texas Mission Conference.”

### **SUBMIT YOUR EVENT**

Send the details by **February 15th** to Don McCrabb at [dmccrabb@uscatholicmission.org](mailto:dmccrabb@uscatholicmission.org) or submit online at <https://uscatholicmission.org/mission-events-submission-form>. We’ll post on our website and as space allows in *ENCOUNTER*.



## Stay in Touch!

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