

Stephen Lucas, OP: Nigerians Should Love their Neighbours

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Reverend Brother Stephen Lucas came to Nigeria in 1959 when he was 26 years old, because the Dominican Brotherhood Order of the Catholic Church in the United States of America asked him to. Like a young Christian soldier, he packed his bags and headed to Yaba, Lagos with its bush paths and dirt roads infested with jiggers. Brother Stephen, as he is fondly known at St Dominic's Church, headed back home recently at the age of 84, after spending 57 years in the country. Shortly before his send-forth, he tells Bennett Oghifo his experiences and his thoughts for the nation, among others



You're leaving Nigeria.

Oh, yes, after 57 years. I am going to Chicago.

What will you do back in the United States?

I don't know for certain but I was told there is an assignment for me but I have not been told the kind of assignment yet.

What inspired you to come to Nigeria?

Well, I belong to the Religious Order called the Dominicans; it was founded 800 years ago, this year, by St Dominic. So, when I entered the Order/community, I was 19 and I made my profession in 1953 in America. I was sent to different places where I spent a year or two and I was at the university at New Mexico; loving it, because it is a wonderful place. Then one day we were sitting around the table with the Parish Priest and he said 'by the way, you're going to Nigeria'. We go where we are told to go and that is how I found myself in Nigeria in October 1959. Since then, I have been working here, helping a lot of people; we have about 40,000 people in our Parish, and it is about 60 years old now. I was told, before I left Chicago, that my job would be to help support locations, help people who want to become Priests and Brothers. When they drove me from the airport here in Yaba, there were no roads, just dirt road and I met a lot of young people who wanted to become Dominicans. They were 15-year olds and I asked them how many years did you spend in school and they said they hadn't been to school but I told them I didn't mean secondary school and they said they had not gone to school at all. And that is how we started and I built a Shrine to St. Jude who is the Patron of difficult cases all over the world. He is the one that helps people with problems; we all have problems. When I came, we didn't have one African Dominican but now we have 200 African Dominicans and all of them are university people.

What was Nigeria like when you came?

Well, we only had one bridge going to Lagos, I remember; that was the Carter Bridge that was built in 1933 by Mr. Carter and he did it so well and when the bridge was shaking they had to replace the bridge and still named it Carter Bridge. There were rail tracks on the bridge; the train service stopped before I arrived but the track was still there. People ask me what Nigeria is like, saying there must be beautiful flowers here. For me, Nigeria is beautiful; 250 languages and they all have their distinctions, they dance different dances. So, that is the joy of Nigeria, the different people, but people always think that the grass is greener on the other side of the fence. If they

break up, then Nigeria will be forgotten and it will become small like Cote d'voire or Benin or some place. It is also important to love people; a lot of people do not have what to eat, a lot of people need support, there are no jobs and people are begging along the streets. Some people are able to make so much from the little they have and this happens if you treat people with, have nice personality and you're honest. Nigerians, for the most part, do that. But people need help. I'll never forget my friend who had malaria and died, he was 15 years old. There were no drugs and that is why life expectancy is so low- 47 years. But, I love Nigeria, I love the people; I love going back and will tell people all these stories- the success stories of the people. The government has to find a way to share the wealth; most people in the North-east do not have anything; all parts of the country should be equal. The people of Makoko who live on stilts over water also need help; it is their culture. I brought a friend from Makoko to be our day guard and to live at St. Dominic but after a while I noticed that he became withdrawn and I asked him if he was happy and he said yes but that he didn't feel good. A Psychiatrist friend of mine advised that I take him to the village to put his legs in the water for a week and when I did that the man became himself again; that is his culture. In Nigeria, as the Lord said, love your neighbour as yourself. Nigerians should love their neighbours who are Nigerians. We have to love each other; that is what we have to do but the world is so political. The people are the joy of Nigeria; the different tribes and these are tiny tribes and they still keep their traditions.

Tell us about you early works.

We have built two churches since I have been here. I have built several churches in various places; one is in Iwaya, Mafoluku, Makoko and at Takwa Bay and I assisted with others. I also built a medical centre here in St. Dominic and at Mafoluku. The clinic is in the Yaba Community Centre (fondly called YCC Hall) I built in 1976 within the premises of the St. Dominic Church with assistance from the German Community in Lagos. The YCC is the main hall in the parish and it is used for all major church functions, wedding receptions and for social activities by various societies in the Parish. The center also accommodates the DOMNET. The clinic was officially opened in 1978 and has been providing various outpatient medical services to both parishioners and non-parishioners within Lagos State. It is divided into five units: Child welfare and general Clinic, Workshop, Antenatal services, Optical services and Laboratory service. They offer HIV/AIDS counseling and Natural Family Planning counseling. The clinic operates between 8a.m. 3p.m. (Monday-Friday). The Laboratory, drug store, consultation and treatment rooms are all fully equipped while there is an ambulance

assigned for clinical uses. I also established the Makoko Clinic in 1988 with assistance from the Dominican Sisters of Monte Mario, which I sought in 1977. It is an extension of the St. Dominic's Clinic and it caters to the Egun fishing community within Makoko and its environs.

The clinic consists of an out-patient clinic and in-patient sections, including ante-natal and immunisation units. It is administered by a Reverend Sister. There are two doctors who run shifts while three nurses are available all the time. We sank a borehole there with support of Arlington Height Rotary Club in the United States of America; it supplies clean water to the clinic. I bought a large piece of land at Mafoluku in 1965 and it has been built into a complex, housing St. Jude's Catholic Church, St. Catherine of Siena Medical Centre, St Martins De Porres Filling Station, Dominican Sisters' House and Arts Shop, Dominican Nursery and Primary School as well as Dominican Secondary School. There is a broadcasting studio close to St. Dominic but I am no longer in charge of that; someone else is in charge of the station now. The studio started in 1994 with the acquisition of the former Crown hotel located close to St. Dominic at No. 364 Herbert Macaulay Way, Yaba, which was named Veritas House and turned into a studio. Veritas means "truth" in Latin. The Veritas Studio was set up basically to preach the word of God to listeners, but in Nigeria, the law does not permit the establishment of religious broadcast media thus the studio was restricted to packaging and coordinating the broadcast of Dominican productions in the various electronic media available in the country. It also sourced for materials from Catholic Radio stations e.g Radio Vatican and St. Joseph Catholic Radio USA for evangelical purposes.

However, today, it has expanded from a purely Dominican Religious facility to a fully equipped studio rendering various services to the public, like production of jingles, recording and waxing of compact digital audio, CDs, production of sound tracks for films, waxing and production of tapes, etc. There is also a book store. The book center was initiated by the late Fr. Ambrose Windbacher, OP and started as a small bookshop in 1955. I got involved in running it in 1962 and from the little store in the old father's house, the book centre has grown into one of the biggest Catholic bookshops in the country with patronage extending to neighbouring countries like the Republic of Benin, Ghana and Cameroon. It has been relocated to a bigger space, beside the Parish office and a warehouse for books is at St. Jude's Mafoluku.

How did you engage young people in and outside the church?

I founded the Young Christian Workers who engage in a lot of activities in church and they are the ones who do the procession on Good Fridays. There are now Young Christian Workers in other Parishes and it is becoming a regional affair. I also founded the Society for Vocation Support in 1982 to raise funds from St. Jude's devotees to train seminarians. Their first fund-raising initiative, (still in use till today) was to reach out to devotees both home and abroad with pledge forms attached to the periodic Novena information bulletins. The response was wonderful and since then, the Society has embarked on launchings and other fund-raising activities involving high networth individuals. A trust fund has since been set up, where proceeds from these activities are put, to yield interest which is used specifically for vocation support.

Tell us about growing up.

I was born to your Marcella Kohlman Lucas and Walter Lucas, an engineer, in Racine, Wisconsin, close to Lake Michigan, one of the Great Lakes. I have a younger sister who will be 80 years next January. We had several houses that we lived in and they were all on water. I always like the water and now that I'm going back to Chicago, I'll visit Lake Michigan; it is huge and takes like two days to cross by ship and it is a mile deep in some places and it is all fresh water-wonderful.

I went to St. John's Nepomic School, Racine, Wisconsin and we had Reverend Sisters. I went to St. Catherine High School, Racine and most of my teachers were Dominican Sisters. I entered the Dominican community in River Forest, Illinois in 1952 after High School and in 1953 I made my first profession at the Dominican community in Dubuque, Iowa. I was transferred to the Provincial House of the St. Pius Priory in Chicago and later to Aquinas Newman Centre at the University of New Mexico, Albuquerque. I had planned to study Medicine at the University of New Mexico but I took my solemn vows on July 29, 1959.