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Chyulu Hills, Kenya (Unsplash/Sho Hatakeyama)

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I've always been intrigued by the expression "don't forget to smell the flowers" and envious in a good sense of people who always seem to have time to do so.

Some years ago, on Easter Sunday morning, I woke up on the cement floor of Kemugongo Outstation Church in Iramba Parish, in a very rural, isolated part of the Diocese of Musoma, Tanzania. We had celebrated the lively Easter vigil service the night before with singing, clapping, dancing and short plays into the early hours of the morning. The children especially radiated an almost electric joy.

Now, after a mosquito-filled, sleepless night, I packed my sleeping bag and Mass kit to drive 40 miles to the other end of the parish for an Easter Sunday Eucharist at Nyiboko Outstation Church.

I walked around to the east side of the church and was literally stunned by the rising sun. It was a brilliant gold ball that got bigger and bigger to envelop the whole horizon and flood the African plains with growing, glowing light.

Excitedly, I exclaimed to my Tanzanian companion, "The sun is rising on a new Easter morning. Last night, we sang, 'The Lord Jesus Christ has risen. It is certain.' How meaningful that God is called the 'sun' in many African languages."

My friend replied, "I feel God with us here right now." I wanted to linger and savor this moving experience, but then the reflective moment was gone.

We loaded millet, a goat and some other supplies in my four-wheel drive Toyota truck for the bouncy road ahead. We set off across the open plain. I hope God didn't mind that we had no more time to stop and "smell the African flowers," but the Christians of Nyiboko were also waiting for the Risen Son that radiant Easter morning.

Like many priests, I have had some of my most moving and touching experiences during the celebration of the sacrament of reconciliation. One Saturday afternoon, I went to Maji Moto Outstation in Iramba Parish. It was a typical hot tropical day. I sat in a small room. A person came in quietly. Then a man's voice began in Swahili: "Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. It has been 25 years since my last confession."

The moment I heard the words "25 years," I felt a surge of energy, a charge of electricity that I can only describe as the "grace of God." As the man talked about his past life and his desire to return to God after these many years, I felt the action of God's love and mercy so alive in that small room.

Even today, I get goose pimples thinking about that "holy" moment when God our Loving Creator was so deeply present. It was like smelling the fragrance of God's grace in the sacrament of reconciliation.

Then there was the time that Martha wanted to receive the sacrament of reconciliation. It was after Mass at Ndoleleji Parish in Shinyanga Diocese, Tanzania. The catechist told me that a woman who couldn't speak wanted to go to "confession."

Martha came into the sacristy, knelt down in front of me and sighed profoundly. She crossed her arms on her chest and bowed deeply. She pointed to the sky, then clutched her heart. She raised her fists in anger, then again crossed her arms on her chest and bowed deeply. She repeated this several times with different gestures.

As Martha communicated her sorrow and desire to return to God through signs and gestures, I profoundly felt the action of God's love and mercy powerfully alive in that small rural church sacristy. When Martha confessed her sins and failings through signs and gestures, she truly evangelized me. I experienced the meaning of the words of Joel — "rend your hearts and return to the Lord." Here was this materially poor Tanzanian woman, but God is so rich in love and mercy.

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The sacrament of reconciliation has its lighter moments, too. One day, I was celebrating the sacrament with young grade-school children in Our Lady of Visitation Church in Nairobi, Kenya. A little boy was hesitating to begin his confession when I heard some whispering in the confessional. I asked the boy: "Is there anyone in there with you?"

"Oh yes, Father," came the quick reply. "This is only my second time so I asked my older sister to help me."

I have treasured these moments of love, of sharing, of forgiveness, of presence, of Christian community. I feel that God's greatest missionary gift to me has been a deep love for the African people. I feel a real part of the African family. In turn, the African people have given me much love and friendship.

In Africa, we have a saying, "You Westerners have the watches, but we Africans have the time." Yes, Africans can teach us a lot about the rhythm of life, the sacredness of life, the meaning of a reflective life of soul seeing and the presence of God in our midst.

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