

DOOR OF NO RETURN  
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A scene flashes in my mind as I write this article. I am standing on the 'door of no return' of Elimina Castle and gazing at the sea right in front of me. My gaze reaches the horizon and beyond to the fifteenth century.

In the fifteen-century the Portuguese navigators landed on the north-west coast of Africa at the present Cape Coast city on the sea-coast of the Atlantic Ocean. The Portuguese built there the Elimina Castle. It is described, as the first know European structure of fortification in Ghana built in 1482.

The castle has only one door, the 'door of no return' opening to the sea. At one time the castle was used for the flourishing slave trade. African people were brought to the castle and their captors sold them as slaves to European and North American merchants. They were kept in the dungeon-like rooms in the castle till ships came to transport them to America and Europe!

I was visiting the Elimina Castle as part of an international group of 73 people. We had gathered at Accra to attend the World Assembly of the International Catholic Union of the Press (UCIP) and Pan African Refresher Programme from June 19 to 26, 2005.

The local hosts had organized for us a one-day picnic trip for sight-seeing to Kakum National Park of 357 Sq. Kms. of virgin rain forest and to Cape Coast. In the early morning in two air-conditioned luxury buses we enjoyed a sooth ride from Accra. A police pilot rider on a motor bike with flash-lights and siren cleared our way through the traffic so that we reached the Kakum National Park without any delay.

In the park we trekked through forest paths for more than an hour. The trees were very tall and the undergrowth was so very thick that there was no chance of seeing any wild animals in the virgin rain forest.

The main attractions in the Park were the 350 feet-long ropeways connecting eight treetop canopies over a forest river. Most of us walked through the ropeways. But a few did not have the nerve to walk through the hanging ropeway, which shook considerably.

I have heard about rainforests in tropical areas with consistently heavy rainfall. So I was delighted to walk through one. There was also a slight drizzle of rain to add to the thrill but not enough to wet us. As a daily walker I enjoyed the mountain trek amidst dense forest. But some of my friends, who are not used to walking like Mrs. Joyce Laetita Kazembe of Zimbabwe, were complaining the next morning of terrible leg pain.

From the Kakum National Park we travelled to Cape Coast and visited Elimina Castle. A guide in the Castle gave us a brief history. All the material for the Castle was brought by ship from Europe by the Portuguese. First it was a flourishing center for trading ivory and gold. Later the Castle was a focal point of slave trades.

In 1637 the Castle was captured by the Dutch. Then the English purchased it in 1972. Depending

on your viewpoints, the guide said, you might condemn the Castle as a centre of abominable slave-trade or appreciate the Castle through which western civilization, culture, religion and education by missionaries came to Africa.

For our lunch that day our Ghanaian hosts had arranged a sumptuous meal in a fabulous 5 star Coconut Groove Hotel situated on the seashore with a narrow beach. People could swim in the swimming pool of the hotel or in the sea.

Our hosts and the organizers of the Pan African Refresher Programme used the banks of the swimming pool for a solemn but informal function of awarding us the Certificate of Merit by the Minister Mr P.Kwesi Nduom and also meeting with the H.E. Cardinal Peter Kodwo Appiah Turkson of the Archdiocese of Cape Coast. He made it to the place just after the Award function. Everybody appreciated the multi-colour and bi-language certificate and informal exchange with the Cardinal.

An unforgettable experience of Ghana was my participation in two Sunday liturgies in the Christ the King Church in a very posh area of Accra city. In Latin Rite the Sunday liturgy is the same all around the world. The liturgy was the same and yet the same time different in the Christ the King Church at Accra. The liturgy was enlivened with a lot of singing with rhythmic movements of the body and sometimes the whole congregation clapping.

The church was full right at the start of the service. If anyone came late, she/he would have to attend the service by remaining outside. As we began the service the ushers made sure that every place in the church was occupied.

The first Sunday I attended, I was one of the two celebrants who received the offerings of the people. A good number on people brought a variety of things like bread, tinned-milk, fruits, eggs, paper napkins, etc. The weight of one basket of food brought by a fat gorgeous lady was so heavy that I could hardly manage to receive and hold it!

The offerings were kept on a side table and around it not too far from the altar. I counted just one item which being more than 100 eggs brought by a dozen or more families. I heard that the parish priest distributed the food items to convents and their boarding for school children.

Later I learnt that Christ the King is the richest parish as it is situated in a very posh area of Accra. The church compound and its parking area were overflowing with hundreds of luxury cars including many Mercedes Bens and BMWs.

After the Holy Mass in Christ the King Church, the local organizer Mrs Ben Assorow and another organizer Ms. Victoria Lugey drove us in their two cars for a sight-seeing trip through the city centre. One of the places we visited was the Kwame Nkrumah Memorial Park and the museum displaying the life of Dr Kwame Nkrumah.. He was the first President of Ghana it when got independence from the British. I heard that he was becoming not only a successful president guiding his nation in the right direction but also a popular African leader. The Americans were afraid of African nations being united under his leadership. So while Dr Nkrumah was visiting a foreign country they managed to stage an army coup in 1966 and got him exiled. Dr Nkrumah was a friend of India and his photo with Mr Jawaharlal Nehru is prominently displayed in the

museum.

My visit to Ghana reminds me of the words of Dr Nkrumah who said, "I have sown the seed and indeed it will germinate." What seed did Dr Nkrumah sow? I can only guess that it was the seed of development and unity of his country and of the whole of Africa. If it is so, the seed is certainly germinating and growing.

Another unforgettable experience was a cocktail party with the President of Ghana H. E. John Agyekum Kufuor and the Minister of Information Mr. Dan Botwe at Palm Royal Beach Hotel. The President greeted every-one of us shaking hands very affably. Then after the formal speeches he lingered with us so that we could get photos with him or chat. But I noticed that when the President was sipping a glass of wine, his personal guard did not want the people to take photos.

My last programme in Ghana was that of spending three days with my fellow African Jesuits. My visit was a pleasant surprise to the Jesuits at Accra. Their phone number had changed and the internet connection was down. So they did not receive my message of visiting them. Yet there I experienced the some warm Ghanaian love and hospitality.

Thanks to the outgoing ways of the Parish Priest Fr Timothy Baghrmwin and his Assistant Fr Ranjit Abeysingha I could make a second trip to Cape Coast to visit the only other Jesuit institution in Ghana - a Jesuit Retreat House. Back at Accra, I could also visit the two sub-stations with Fr Ranjit and even preach a well-received homily in one substation. The intermingling with the ordinary African people of the sub-station was a very enjoyable and enriching experience for me. In my homily I spoke to them about the universality and the Catholicity of the Christian religion.

The Jesuits or the Society of Jesus is looking after a parish and two sub-stations all of them in very poor areas of the city. Like in Christ the King Church people fill the churches but hardly anyone comes in a car. Those living nearby walked to the church and others came by public vehicles. The churches, which I visited, were large simple buildings but have no parking area.

With the superbly organized international meeting and Refresher programme and other events related to them I would have come with certain limited ideas of my visit of Ghana, but for the 3 more days spent with my fellow Jesuits in another far away, rather poor area of the city. Thanks to the great Ghanaian hospitality and love, I felt at home everywhere.