



Sr Maura Lynch

Finishing his series on women of faith **Fr John Murray**, parish priest of Downpatrick, writes of Maura Lynch, whose heroic work in Angola and Uganda was recognised with an honorary degree from UCD and residency for life in Uganda.

‘The Lord doesn’t send you to Africa’ the speaker said, pausing for effect, ‘until he puts Africa into your heart’. In another time – for another person – this saying was a ‘word’ of freedom for a priest struggling with a superior’s decision. This saying read at a vocation retreat led a young man to enter the seminary. For a young girl in the 1950s in Ireland it was a sign and an adventure that she lived until the very day the same Lord called her home.

Where was home for Maura Lynch – that is before Africa? Patrick, her father, worked for the national postal service and frequently had to travel to different parts of the country: Killarney, Limerick and Dublin. Her mother, a teacher, kept a unity in the family with her strong faith and the speaking of Irish in the home. At her funeral Mass Bishop John Baptist Kagwa spoke of Maura not knowing which country she loved best – Ireland or Uganda.

In the young nation of Ireland still trying to find its feet in the world – in those years after the Second World War – the adventure was to go to other lands and bring the richness of the Gospel to those they met. Maura entered the new congregation the Medical Missionaries of Mary in 1956 and trained as a doctor qualifying in

the top three of her class in 1964. She was to spend the next twenty years in Angola as medical director of a hospital at Chiulo, which was in a remote part of the country. Resources were scarce and things were not helped when the war of independence from Portugal broke out only to be followed by a civil war. Maura spent long hours in the operating theatre dealing with many war-wounded patients. Often she conducted operations with armed soldiers beside her in the theatre. Breda, one of Maura’s sisters, remembers their parents being worried about their daughter – letters took six weeks to arrive and often the more hair-raising tales were not related until years later.

The years in Angola were followed by a longer period in the country of Uganda. Here Maura was based in Kitovu hospital in the diocese of Masaka. It was her pioneering work in the area of obstetric fistula – a preventable condition after childbirth – which won this wonderful Irish woman a reputation as a champion of poor African women. In 2009 Maura was awarded an honorary fellowship by University College Dublin – the highest honour the school bestows on medical graduates. Professor Bill Powderly



Dr. Maura Lynch (1938-2017) by Enda Griffin as part of the campaign, Women on Walls at RCSI in partnership with Accenture.

at the time spoke of her bravery and resilience dealing with large crowds of people who had TB and leprosy, as well as numerous patients with shrapnel and bullet wounds. The professor also estimated that Maura was responsible for conducting over 1000 fistula repairs between 1993 and 2007 – ‘an astonishing record that one can say will never be bettered’.

Repairing the body led Maura also

to try to repair something of the spirit. She saw so clearly the physical, psychological and social isolation endured by African women and she became a great champion of their dignity and search for justice. ‘This was her vocation’ the professor said in his address, ‘looking after these women and babies. She loved Africa and she always wanted to be there.’

The government of Uganda award-

ed Maura a unique certificate of residency for life in recognition of her contribution to the health and welfare of its people over three decades. Medical authorities in both Ireland and England also recognised with various honours the wonderful pioneering work Maura did in the field of obstetrics and gynaecology.

Behind all this indefatigable effort was also a woman of deep prayer who drew strength from the Eucharist and from the prayer of her community life with her sisters and coworkers in the hospital. Maura was a wonderful human being who had a lovely singing voice which she brought to the liturgies. She was a great comedian and mimic and entertained the various communities with hastily improvised plays put on at a moment's notice. This was especially appreciated during

the rigours of the war years in Angola. Maura found joy in empowering people, which earned her the local name of Nakimuli or 'flower'. In the great words of the early century apologist, St Irenaeus of Lyons, she indeed lived life to the full and thereby gave glory to God.

Irenaeus would also add that 'to be fully alive consists in seeing God face to face'. Despite her vigour at the very end of the day in which she was to celebrate fifty years in Africa Maura passed quietly before the Lord's face. A fall getting out of a jeep broke her hip. During the period of recuperation she died 9 December 2017 in Kampala hospital surrounded by several sisters and friends. A few days later Nakimuli was laid to rest in the Butende monastery. Africa had indeed taken her into its heart. 

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