

## The Passion of Sister Yengo: Chiropractic in the Congo

Sister Brigitte Yengo is a Roman Catholic nun belonging to the Order of the Sisters of Notre Dame of the Rosary. She is also a chiropractic physician and a medical doctor, having earned her chiropractic degree from the National University of Health Sciences (NUHS) in 1987 and her medical degree from the University of the Congo in 1991.

Sister Yengo was born in the Congo, but was raised and educated in France, where she attended high school and then college, studying psychology and becoming fluent in five languages. She returned to the Congo as a nun and met Father Felix Perel, a missionary priest from France. After years of tending to the spiritual needs of Brazzaville residents, Fr. Perel was sent to the United States to become a chiropractic physician. He returned and practiced in Brazzaville after graduating from NUHS in 1981.

Because Fr. Perel served as the only health provider in the region for years, his work became very important to the people in the Brazzaville region. So, when Sister Yengo returned home to the Congo and met Fr. Perel, it was not long thereafter that she was chosen by her Bishop to attend NUHS and study chiropractic.

By the time Sr. Yengo returned home to Brazzaville in 1987, Fr. Perel had finally retired to France, leaving her as the only chiropractic physician in her country. Undaunted, fueled by her unshakable faith that the Lord would provide her with the patience and grace to see His way, she eventually had a chiropractic clinic built. Many of the people she served, however, suffered from extreme conditions, or diseases that fell beyond the scope of chiropractic's conservative/preventative influence. So it was that Sr. Yengo took on additional medical training and became a medical doctor, so her clinic could become a hospital where patients could be cared for with diet, nutrition, hygiene, and the therapeutic touch of a chiropractic adjustment - in addition to the lifesaving application of surgical procedures and the timely use of the proper antidote or antibiotic.

The "bush" hospital was filled with a spirit of love, caring and sharing, but tragically, it all came to an end in 1997, when ethnic and political tensions erupted into civil war between army officers from the north, who supported President Denis Sassou-Nguesso, and southerners backing rebels who supported the former president, Pascal Lissouba. During the war, Sr. Brigitte (as she also came to be known) partnered with the Catholic Relief Services and worked with Red Cross doctors to help minister to battlefield casualties.

It was during her first day on the job in the battlefield that Sr. Yengo found her other calling. Two children were lying next to their parents, who had both been killed moments earlier. Sr. Yengo took both children back with her, and as the fighting continued, the number of lost and abandoned children grew. Her humanitarian efforts to offer refuge to children eventually developed into an orphanage with 37 children.

Although Sr. Yengo was allowed to continue her work by the two warring factions, as the fighting escalated, she found herself in harm's way more often. Following an intense confrontation with a rebel chief who began shooting wildly at her, wounding her in the right hand, her Bishop sent her

to the United States to keep her safe (and alive.) When she arrived in November 1998, she began work in New York City with the children of incarcerated single mothers. Later, she moved to Atlanta, where she worked as a counselor and chiropractic physician with battered women and abused children.

Nearly a year ago, Sr. Yengo began declaring her resolve to return to the Congo to resume her work. In September 2003, the United Nations warned that despite improvements on the political front, an "acute humanitarian crisis" remained in the Pool region (the area where Sr. Yengo lived and worked) following a year of hostilities that ended in a peace deal in March 2003. Then in October, 13 people were killed in Mindouli, in southwest Pool, when a gunfight erupted between the army and rebels.

Sr. Yengo returned to the Congo in mid-January 2004 to set up her clinic and hospital again. Before she departed the U.S., she learned that the orphanage had swollen to 47 children - those abandoned by the war, with AIDS, or whose parents had died of AIDS. Meanwhile, another threat emerged, with the potential to add even more suffering to the country Sr. Yengo had left only six years ago. In February 2003, in the Cuvette Ouest region, 500 km. north of Brazzaville, 16 people died from an outbreak of the Ebola virus. In December, the Health Ministry reported that the Ebola outbreak in Cuvette Ouest had stabilized, with 29 deaths among 42 registered cases to date.

During her years in the states, Sr. Yengo became a member of the Association For Catholic Chiropractors (AFCC). Before leaving for the Congo, she wrote to me. As always, her thoughts were directed to the welfare of others. She felt the number-one mission of all the students studying to become chiropractic physicians was to study: "It is their mission to achieve their purpose in becoming excellent as chiropractors by working hard." She also believed: "As one becomes closer to God, the more respect one will have for patients, because one will see that each person is made in the image of God. For Jesus loved everyone, and we can have the same heart."

"Always choose the good," she said, "and when you touch your patients, touch them in love, for they are the temples of the Holy Spirit. To be a good doctor, you need to be a good family person, balanced spiritually, morally and psychologically."

She concluded by praying: "I have no money to give you, but I have my knees. I will pray for you to be an example to society, to be a good healer, to care for people's suffering, to love people, to be rich in spirit, and to always be grateful. I will pray for you, your family, your practice, and your patients."

The many friends who are privileged to know Sister Brigitte Yengo understand the stirrings in her heart that drew her home to the Congo. It is the one place where, despite the peril, she feels closest to fulfilling her religious vows. It is the place where her daily labor affords her an incremental glimpse of God's handiwork in a land filled with pain, and where she is fortified with courage and insight.

Sr. Yengo's vow of poverty prevents her from accepting direct contributions, so the AFCC is accepting donations for the clinic/orphanage/hospital on her behalf. You can call (203) 629-2727 or visit the AFCC Web site ([www.afcc.net](http://www.afcc.net)), where you can also watch a video interview of Sister Yengo.

*Karen Shields Wright, DC*  
*President, Association for Catholic Chiropractors*

JUNE 2004

