

MISSION MESSAGE

Guest Column: *Once Upon a Time*

By **Daria Braithwaite**

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Editor's Note: *On her first visit to Malawi, Daria Braithwaite encountered the missions not as an abstract concept, but as living faith — in classrooms without desks, churches rising brick by brick, and children whose joy and questions revealed both deep need and deep hope. In this personal reflection, she shares how witnessing the Church in mission transformed her understanding of generosity, responsibility, and the universal call to evangelization.*

I stood up from my desk and found myself eye to eye with a golden peacock — a gift from a mission priest from India who had once visited our office. It was now my turn to visit the missions for the first time, and I knew I would return to that chair with a greater sense of responsibility.

Why did You pick me, God? I wondered.

I was about to fly alone to Malawi — to a continent I had never visited. I had read in books that it was dusty, and that people carried their own water. But I needed to see it with my own eyes.

After twenty-one hours on the plane, I landed in Lilongwe, the capital of Malawi. The airport was tiny, and there were no tall buildings in sight. As we left the airport, our car stopped at the first traffic light. Along the roadside stood small markets — crates with upside-down chickens, piles of sandals and crocs, stacks of watermelons, and colorful assortments of vegetables. People crowded the curbs, each one moving with quiet purpose.

Tap, tap. I turned to see a boy at my window, pursing his lips and touching his fingers to his mouth. Naively assuming that everyone in the missions was Catholic, I thought he was asking me to pray for him. I nodded, but he kept gesturing. Then I heard the click of Father Peter, our driver, locking the doors. The boy wasn't asking for prayer — he was begging for money. I hoped I hadn't just lied to him. I said a quick prayer anyway, and we drove on.

My first visit was to Dedza Primary School, funded by the Missionary Childhood Association. I stepped into the classroom and immediately noticed the bare walls, the tin roof, and the absence of desks. Yet the children rushed to greet me, smiles a mile wide, eager to share their grades and favorite subjects.

They took me inside the neighboring church, still under construction. I reached out my hand and traced the rough edges of a few bricks. I pictured myself back home at the count table, reading the names of schools and parishioners who

made donations. I am touching what their prayers and sacrifices are building, I thought. Donation by donation. Brick by brick. Soul by soul.

After a week visiting schools, hospitals, and seminaries, it was time for the first-ever Missionary Childhood Congress in Malawi. Children from the country's eight dioceses gathered to celebrate the faith that missionaries had brought to them — and to embrace their duty to continue that mission from their villages.

At Mass, Malawian girls danced down the aisle — their hands outstretched to Christ, their feet keeping rhythm with the melodic voices of the children's choir. Each day, clergy and children met to discuss Catholic social teaching, child trafficking and labor, mental health, care for the environment, and how to be a missionary of hope. They prayed the World Mission Rosary and met with Sister Inês Paulo, Secretary General of Missionary Childhood in Rome.

It turns out children in the missions take great selfies. As a crowd of them fought to fit into my camera roll, I noticed a pair of eyes watching me. A young girl named Martyu asked if she could touch my hair. It was French-braided and folded into a jaw clip. "How is it so smooth?" she asked.

Soon, a group of her friends joined us. They asked what houses and cars looked like in America. They took turns posing with my sunglasses.

"Are you married?"
"What is it like to ride a plane?"
"We are scared to be bitten by rats at night."

I slowly realized how different their lives were from mine. Many marry young. Some will never leave Malawi — yet they already know something about the outside world.

As the group dispersed, Martyu grasped my arm and led me to a nearby curb so we could continue talking. But before long, a priest from Zimbabwe approached to ask for a meeting. I didn't want to leave her alone, but I couldn't ignore a priest. As I looked over my

shoulder, Martyu lowered her eyes and disappeared into the sea of children. I never saw her again.

That day, it felt like I caught a boulder. *God, why did You give me such a sensitive heart?*

Now I know — it's because I saw myself in them. We all have a childhood. We all ask questions, seek attention, and make spontaneous comments. As a witness, my job is to take that boulder and lay down a path to Christ by sharing these children's stories.

That's the thing about childhood — we all love a good story, don't we?

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