

CLOSING THOUGHTS FROM A CATHOLIC RELIEF SERVICES VOLUNTEER

“It often happens that the reason for doing something only emerges after it has been done. . .” Malcolm Muggeridge

Since now my “doing something is done,” may I offer some closing thoughts about my nine month tenure in the Altoona-Johnstown Diocese as part of the Catholic Relief Services Volunteer Program with placement in the United States. Having ended the profound calling of serving for one year in The Gambia with the HIV/AIDS Health Care and Support Team in Basse and with the Missionaries of Charity at their Maria Kunda Home in Bakoteh, perhaps I still am awaiting the reason for my work done here in the US to emerge. Looking back upon the year as it progressed in Africa, I have come to realize that my purpose at the setting out for my mission did not hold its meaning as my experiences while living with the people brought deeper awakenings for the reason of that service.

When I came to the Altoona-Johnson Diocese for the US Component of the Program my intent was to call a greater awareness to the lives of our brothers and sisters around the world and to instill a closer sense of solidarity with our one human family. This purpose was given in my letter of introduction to the Bishop, churches, and schools in Altoona-Johnstown. Through the kindness of the Bishop and the support and encouragement of the Missions Office, I was privileged to impart this message by sharing my experiences while in The Gambia to this diocese.

The work then began of making visits to schools and churches to share my story about the people with whom I lived and loved. The people in whose faces Christ could be seen and served as was modeled by the Missionaries of Charity living their credo in service, “I do it to Him.” So I trod along from October to the final days of May throughout the diocese with my posters, props, and talk to present the last year of my life as lived in the material poverty of a country, but a country rich in the values of life. Being back in the US has not been an easy transition for me, and I still struggle with the reality of life here as I consider the poverty of our wealth.

What did this new venture hold? I will admit after of year of being in remote villages in huts and homes carrying medication and nutrition to the chronically ill and to sick mothers and children; bringing supplies to the orphans and vulnerable children of HIV/AIDS; teaching in the schools; caring for motherless and malnourished babies and toddlers, I felt that making a presentation would call for someone else to be living in my skin to be able to only “talk.”

But some things happened along the way which brought a sense of purpose to my spirit and blessings to my soul.

At the Newman Club, I was greeted by enthusiastic University students guided by their “fearless leader,” as they endearingly called their campus minister. These students were eager to hear the stories about the African mission from the CRS volunteer. Some members of the Club had just returned from a Spring break where they took their time off from school to give of themselves to be with and to help others. And they were excited about their experiences! It made me think of the joy I found when I was in the mission field, a particular deep joy which I only realize during those times with the poor. Pope John Paul II said, “There is a special presence of Christ in the poor,” and I felt that and knew it to be true.

When visiting the high schools of the diocese, I met serious-minded students who listened to my stories with deep intent, perhaps experiencing an identification with some of the story characters who came to life. In the elementary schools I found great compassion among the 5th, 6th, 7th and 8th graders as most of their follow-up questions concerned the young Gambian people of whom I spoke. In all the schools, I was so proud of the caliber of work I observed, and I felt an air of happiness as the halls of the buildings sang with the beauty of the arts displaying creative talents of the students. My welcome by each school was courteous and warm with accommodating principals and teachers, and with students attentive while I spoke and respectful in their manner toward me. The children of the diocese are indeed fortunate to benefit from the values of Catholic Education instilled by caring principals and dedicated teachers. Each one is surely a witness to God’s love in the community.

My theme in the presentation to the students was from Jeremiah 29 - “I know well the plans I have for you, plans to give you a future full of hope.” Through my stories, the weaving of those plans by God our Master Weaver unraveled as He drew the threads to connect the lives of His children from different parts of the world bringing a future of hope to brothers and sisters.

At the parish churches where several pastors opened their doors for me to share my experiences as a Catholic Relief Services Volunteer, I was blessed to have worshipped at the weekend Masses and was able to gain a feel for the heartbeat of the church. All the pastors were kind and supportive, and their receptive parishioners evidenced compassion as they listened to my words. I understood the good works of these faith communities guided by diligent, hard-working priests as I heard and read about their activities and projects to help others both at home and in distant lands. I

also had the opportunity to speak with some CCD classes where the students shined in their compassion and interest for the Gambian people. In addition to the individual life stories in my parish talks, I described the continual work of Catholic Relief Services which is the official international humanitarian agency of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, our Catholic community, as part of our mission work overseas. The programs Operation Rice Bowl and Fair Trade were highlighted as ways that some are engaging in this work, while others participate in advocacy programs to pursue issues regarding peace and social justice. Also in the Altoona-Johnstown Diocese there is an envelope in the donation packets for the annual collection of Catholic Relief Services to help carry on programs to assist our brothers and sisters around the world in all types of circumstances.

After each visit I was drained both emotionally and physically. Every time as I related my story to a group, I would re-live, in a very real way, my original experience with “my” person, as well as so many of the details of my time with the people. What does it all come to mean, what is it all worth to become so exhausted from the sharing? I confided in a CRS colleague who had been in the first Volunteer Program a few years previous to this. She looked at me directly and said with the wisdom of a sage - “Every time you tell your story, you honor the lives of those you speak about. Don’t ever forget that.” Perhaps this is the reason which now “emerges after all is done.”

And so as I close my words to the Altoona-Johnstown Diocese --

May God bless the time we shared together and to all those who listened to and heard my story, may I respectfully ask that you hold on to those lives with honor as you realize a greater awareness and a closer sense of solidarity with our brothers and sisters in God’s family of man.

With God’s blessing - we will!

My sincere appreciation to Bishop Adamec for his welcome and to the Missions Office for the work done on my behalf. My heartfelt gratitude to each one of this Diocese for the privilege of letting me be with you as the Master Weaver wove and touched the threads of our lives according to His plan.

Patricia Glogowski