Tanzania's Flying Padre

Pat Patten
Father Pat Patten has received an prestigious humanitarian honour, the 2006 Oscar Romero “Give Me Wings” Award for his work with the Flying Medical Service in Tanzania, East Africa. Pat began the FMS 23 years ago and has made it his life’s work, a work that the Catholic Men’s and Women’s movement of Austria felt worthy of their highest humanitarian honour. They presented it to him on November 23, 2006, in front of nearly 500 people who gave him a five-minute standing ovation.

Fr. Pat, why do you work with the Maasai?

One of the amazing things about working with people who appear so different is that it reminds me, and I hope that it would remind all of us, that we’ve really not all the same. We’re very, very different, and we can either look at one another with a lot of prejudice or we can look at the big differences and learn to love those differences. I work with the Maasai because I think I have something to offer them and they certainly have something to offer back to us.

How have the human rights of the Maasai been infringed upon?

Before independence the Maasai were promised new lands, enough water for their cattle, enough veterinary services, enough health care, enough food, and most of these Colonial government promises were broken. But there’s another aspect to human rights that’s not so obvious. We talk about the freedom of speech or the freedom to not be in prison, but I believe there’s also a right to education, to good health care, to a basic dignity. And often we make it impossible for people to enjoy these basic rights and freedom, not just in the country of Tanzania but in many other struggling countries as well.

For example, three days of developed nations farm subsidies is more money than the entire foreign aid given by these governments for an entire year. These subsidies may be helpful as charity to some, but they also prevent people like the Maasai from marketing their cattle at a fair price. Yes, perhaps this is not just a matter of charity, of giving, but also a matter of justice and human rights. Why should a child who’s born in Tanzania expect to live less than 40 years? Is that a matter of charity or is that a matter of justice?

How do you feel about the work you have been able to do?

There are so many people I work with, and without each one of those people what I do would not be possible. There are people who spent a long time in prison because of the things we have been working on, and I think those people deserve to be honoured more than I do.

Perhaps I could tell a very short story that expresses what I feel. All of my pilots including my first pilot who is from Lintz, Austria, Leopold Gatringer, all of them — Rebecca, Elizabeth, Leopold — everyone who worked with me over the years, because people appreciated what they did have, had children named in their honor in the different villages where we served. Over the entire 23 years that I’ve been working with the Flying Medical Service, however, no one in any of the villages was ever named Pat.

One day I landed at a village and a woman came running out to the plane with a big smile on her face. She said, “Do you remember me?”

We see 58 patients a day, 365 days a year, so I didn’t remember her. But she said, “I remember you. You saved my life. And you saved the life of my child. I had obstructed labor, you flew in, you flew me to hospital, I lived and my child lived. And I’m so happy that I named him after you. ‘Hey Peter, come here.’”

I think the important thing is not that a child gets named Pat, or that someone by the name of Pat receives an award. The important thing is that the woman lives, and Peter lives.