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TRACING A NEW PATH

Damasus Okoro, CSSp

In November 2000, the appointments for my seminary class of Nigerian Spiritans due to go on mission service were released. In June 2001, I was ordained and 'empowered' for mission. With due consultation, I was posted to Pakistan. Just the mention of this name raised goose pimples among my family members and friends. This is so because Pakistan is an Islamic State and it had made news headlines due to attacks on churches and church institutions. Also in neighbouring Afghanistan the USA were pounding the Taliban. All these facts painted a picture of insecurity and fear. It took me two years to secure the visa, and so on November 14th, 2003, Brendan Aroh and I set out for Pakistan.

Initial shocks

Landing in Pakistan we met with inclement weather. It was the peak of winter. We had never experienced such cold weather previously. The language (Urdu),

was strange and reminded me of the apostles when they spoke in tongues. I didn't know any word in Urdu apart from the word "Urdu" itself. This too posed a challenge as Urdu is not written in Roman script. All the Pakistani food appeared over-spiced for me and eating the food was accompanied by shedding of tears, probably a way of enjoying a delicacy! But I think the spices induced the tears.

The wide margin between the rich and the poor not only amazed me but frightened me terribly and made me realize there was much to be done. Feudalism is still a way of life in Pakistan. Here we have both the big landlords and the 'haris' who work on the land almost as slaves. Among these poor people are the Marwari Bheels with whom I work. They are economically poor and exploited. In Pakistan and in Sindh in particular, bonded labour is very common. Here they are forced to borrow large sums of money to pay for medical treatments, to

marry their children well by providing a dowry and at death to perform the funeral rites appropriately. An entire family can be pledged or bonded in return for loans given to their parents or guardians. Even death does not give them respite from bondage. The misery, one can almost say slavery, continues with the burden of paying off the debts which are automatically transferred to children when parents die. What a vicious cycle!

In this milieu of poverty, there is little or no access to health, education and the basics required to live in dignity. Education of course is the least priority as they concern themselves primarily with basic survival, the safety of their family and children, and working long hours for what they and their animals will eat.

Where to begin

Looking at the unending cycle and the evils of feudalism it was difficult to know where to begin. What's my point of entry, in this vicious and ruthless cycle that leaves the vulnerable poor little chance for survival? Here the mission statement of Christ came to mind and this has remained a propelling factor for me and addresses the crux of my work. "The spirit of the Lord is on me for he has anointed me to bring the good news to the afflicted. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives, sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free" (Luke 4:18).

My expectations

After the long period of formation in the religious life and having come from a traditional Catholic background, I thought I had all that I needed to plant and cultivate the seed of the gospel anywhere. My assignment in Pakistan proved me wrong. Here I am not only sent to the 'lost sheep of Israel' but rather to those sheep 'that are not of this fold' whom I must walk with on a daily basis.

Previously I had a picture of the traditional church before my eyes even after reading and being informed about the mission in Pakistan.



Samina (in yellow dress) seems unaware that Damasus Okoro, CSSp (right) and a local health officer are discussing her condition.



"I am thrilled as I see our people showing interest in the Gospel message."

The Marwari Bheels are Hindus. My work is to dialogue with Hinduism, in the process proclaiming the message of liberation. I assist in establishing and supervising small primary schools, helping the sick by bringing them to hospital and also interceding where possible when injustices are being inflicted on our people.

My first Easter

The experience of my first Easter here is still vivid in my mind. I had braced myself for the traditional Easter ceremonies. I went with a confrere to a distant ilaqa (village). The local language here was still very new to me and I was battling within myself as to which language I might sing the Exultet, as I knew it in Latin, English and my own native language. I asked the confrere if there was a good choir where we were going. Not to discourage me, he said I should not worry. On our way, like Isaac, I asked about the animal that would be used for the sacrifice. Again, he said I should not worry. Then we arrived in the village with a few scattered mud homes where the Holy Saturday liturgy was to be celebrated.

It was a humble bhagti celebration. Bhagti is a communal way of worship among the Marwari Bheels. It is the most popular expression of religious sentiments

for them. In the bhagti, there was no lighting of the Easter candle or singing of the Exultet. Rather we lit the incense and sang bhajans (hymns) emphasizing our unity with God and the union of our soul (atma) with the Spirit or Soul of God (Atman). This flowed into the gospel story of liberation and salvation culminating with a sign of fellowship with each other and with God through the sharing of bhavi (sweets or fruits).

Great interest in the Gospel

The beginnings were very difficult due to the very different climate, food and language and a totally different set up than what I was used to. Now having become more fluent in the language and tuned in to the weather, I find my work exciting as I share Christ's love and his transforming grace among our people. I am thrilled as I see our people showing interest in the Gospel message. This I observe when I show them a film of the life of Christ. I find them clapping their hands and excited at the miracle scenes, especially when Christ feeds the 5000 or heals the sick. On inquiry, I realized that they too are yearning for liberation from hunger, fear, evil spirits, forces of oppression and from slavery. Yes, and a yearning for good health too. Our

health care apostolate has made the holistic nature of Christ's liberation very clear to our people. So while taking care of the soul, the body has not been left untended.

Our people

A little girl Samina, had suffered for eight years from chronic TB of the spinal chord that left her almost paralyzed, subdued and lonely. After we brought her to the hospital, a light was seen at the end of the tunnel. But a complete cure required constant check ups and the taking of medications. On a visit to the family, I was greeted with a silence that made me very frightened. I realized she had not taken her medications for a while because they were finished and they had no money to get more. Hope came again when we got the drugs for her. Around the family house the voice of poverty was very loud.

Therefore despite the challenges the mission poses, there is much more to be done to bring the Gospel message into the hearts of our people. This special outreach to these marginalized but unique people has remained a soul-searching experience that keeps propelling me to action. It has been a new classroom where I have learnt a lot and am still learning, thanks to the support of the experienced confreres who were in the field long before I came. ■