Spiritan Magazine

Volume 30
Number 1 *February*

Article 13

2-2006

VICS: A Tree is Planted in Kolofata

A Tree is Planted in Kolofata

Dr. Ellen Einterz is a volunteer with VICS who works in a mission hospital in the bush village of Kolofata in Cameroon. Dan Carpenter of the Peace Corps writes of her in these terms, "A Catholic. Enemy of no one. Too busy prolonging people's stay on earth to judge who deserves heaven. A brilliant physician who has served in Africa for twenty years. She works in a country where the average annual income wouldn't pay for a good day's excursion in North America, where cholera, malaria and AIDS are endemic and where children die from lack of drugs, plentiful here at home." Ellen wrote this letter recently to her fellow volunteers.

Aisha is a seven-year-old girl who one morning was playing outside her mother's hut in the courtyard with her cat. The pet scrambled over a pile of firewood and as Aisha reached to retrieve him, a deadly carpet viper that had been hunkered down between two cut branches nipped the little finger of her right hand. Within half an hour, Aisha's hand was swollen round like a tennis ball and the arm up to her shoulder swelled as well. By the time she was brought to the hospital later that day there were fluids swelling into her chest and unclottable blood leaking from her gums and dripping from the bite wound where her father had incised it with a razor blade.

Absolute rest

She was prescribed antivenim and seven days of absolute bed rest. Standing, sitting, propping herself up was strictly forbidden. She was permitted to lie in bed, and that was all, and this she did. Alone most of the time, she lay quietly like a monk in meditation as the minutes and the hours and the sweltering days crept by. There were no pastime diversions — no coloring books or toys or television — to help alleviate the harshness of this sentence.

A time for everything

"African time", as most Kolofatans will gladly tell you, is not the same thing as time anywhere else. African time is loose, unmeasured, unmeasurable; it only is. A ten o'clock meeting is likely to start at two or three or four, or maybe tomorrow, "tomorrow" being any day after today, and it goes without saying that noon is as good a time as anytime to begin preparing for it. "An hour", signifies some duration shorter than a day. A child "five years old" might well be older that three and younger than eight, but chances are he is not five. From March through June, when the temperature never drops below 100° and the air itself seems to suffocate like a wool blanket, the usual greeting after hello is "How is the heat?" and the reply is never an exclamation or a complaint or even an observation, but rather "It is the time for the heat." In October when the insects swarm and buzz like chain saws at night, the greeting is "How are the mosquitoes?" and the reply is "It is their time." A person dies not because of illness or accident but because their God-ordained time has come. Humans might pretend to have some grip on it, but Kolofatans know that time belongs to God.

Waiting Time

For seven days — 168 consecutive hours — Aisha lay in bed, waiting unhurriedly. Even with the taste of blood in her mouth, and with her right hand engorged and throbbing, it did not occur to her to whimper or complain. The medical team came by and checked her twice a day, and every time they found her reposing quietly in her bed, tracing lines on the mattress with her finger, twisting a piece of cloth in different patterns around her arm, or just staring a the mosquito net overhead, waiting without even knowing she was waiting for some other time to come.

Outside a room in an adjacent pavilion, a ten-year-old boy named Mohamadou planted a mango tree. His father, Alhadji Youssoufa, a diabetic with leg ulcers, had been hospitalized in the room for nearly a month. Every morning Mohamadou watered the sapling and inspected it to see if it had grown overnight. When asked, he explained that he had planted it so that anyone any time — *Même quand*, he said — might know that his father had once stayed in that room.

Now this, now that

In Kolofata we work every day in the intense, urgent present. The transfusion must be given now, the convulsion must be stopped, the bleeding must be staunched, the pain must be relieved, the obstruction must be unobstructed, always now. But in every baby we deliver, every toddler we treat, every teen we teach, in every mother and father we tug back from death's summons, we see the future and the everlasting kingdom to which we all belong.

When the time came, Aisha was told she could sit up. She did so with a smile, but with no surprise.

Alhadji Youssoufa was discharged the following week. As father and son walked hand in hand down the sandy path, Mohamadou shouldered the wooden crutch his father no longer needed. Nearing our big gate, the boy turned and lifted the crutch up high above his head. We waved back, bid him safe journey and promised to look after his tree. ■