

P. SINA (lettera scritta a Fr. Bill Knipe dall'ospedale italiano del Cairo 1/2/1997)

Dear Bill,

I resume my report at the point where I left it off in my letter a few days ago. I have decided to complete it as well as I can while I have some time for it before I start once more my other daily activities.

I have not yet completed the sorrowful story of the many problems the Sudanese refugees face in Egypt. Young people (by this I mean children of school age) face the problem of their education. It is practically impossible for them to find room in government schools which are already overcrowded. I have already said that this is one of the human rights which is denied them in the host country. We have opened a school to help solving this problem, in part and for some. In part, because our Saint Charles Lwanga School comprises only a kindergarten and grades one to eight (S. Charles Lwanga, you may or may not know, was an Ugandan martyr whose memoria is celebrated on June 6th: St Charles Lwanga and Companions). For some, because, in spite of having converted all available rooms of the former missionary residence into class-rooms and having built a few others round the church apse, we cannot accommodate more than a few hundred school children. What about the others who cannot find room in our school? What about those who complete grade 8 in our school continuing their education? There is no answer to these questions! Can you imagine the enormity of these problems?

Then there is the problem of medical care for those who have health problems. The medical expenses are not light, except in public government hospitals, which are overcrowded and do not excel for the kind of accommodation they offer and for order and cleanliness.

And finally, just to put an end to this already long list, there is the problem of preserving one's national and cultural identity. The Sudanese are very particular about it and anxious to keep it. To see how much they care for it, it is enough to look at some external aspects of their life-style: at how immaculately dressed the men are and how shinningly polished their shoes are and how different the dress of women is from the Egyptian ordinary women and how much more similar to that of African black women; and particularly at their hair styles that can take a bewildering number of extremely fanciful forms, as in the rest of Black Africa's countries. The number of women that use some kind of make-up to appear paler than they naturally are, is very little. It is very obvious that to the Sudanese, Black and Sudanese is beautiful. They are so anxious about preserving their identity that, even after death, they want to keep their link with their country and culture unbroken: hence they do all they can to have the bodies of those who die in Egypt flown back to their country. Not even when dead, do they wish to remain in this foreign land.

But how can they in the long run preserve their identity? How can they save themselves from being, with the passing of years, absorbed by a culture so different from theirs, that keep pressing upon in so many different ways on a small minority surrounded by an immense majority whose identity and culture differ from theirs in so many ways? This applies particularly to those who are born in Egypt. The colour of their skin is that of the Sudanese, but will their culture and identity, too, continue to be Sudanese?

After reading the long list of problems you may be induced to believe that the Sudanese in Egypt have allowed themselves to be overcome by their problems and that they are people who go around pulling long faces, unable to bear the burdens with courage and with a smile on their lips, a prey to despair etc, etc,.. Nothing could be less true than this description.

I know of some cases of people who have suffered for some time from depression or other forms of low spirits. I know of one case of a Sudanese who hanged himself: that happened last year on Christmas

Night (or was it at the end of the Year's Night?) I attended the prayers of a large number of friends and acquaintances of his, offered to the Lord for his Eternal Repose; they were without exception expressions of how keenly they feel the tragedy of their country and people and of how deeply the sword of sorrow penetrates their hearts for all that they have to suffer. I know of a number of women, like those whose conditions I have described above, that sometimes seem about to succumb to the burdens they have to bear. But invariable (or almost) you see them, after a while, surfacing from the pond of despair and resuming their life with courage and serenity. And what I have written about these wonderful women can be applied in general to all other Sudanese, whether young or elderly, whether men or women. How can this be explained?

As regards younger people, their serenity may be attributed to their lack of sad experiences, perhaps. Their experience of hardships has been over a short period of time and for fewer tribulations than for the elderly people's. But what about the older people for whom this kind of explanation of their serenity cannot hold?

I resorted to my usual way of finding an answer to this question. I approached some of the Sudanese who seem to be more mature and wiser than the others. I had long conversations with them and these are the answers I got.

"Abuna, we Sudanese are from our childhood accustomed to face and bear hardships. We haven't an easy life at all. Together with this being used to suffering hardships goes our firm belief that hardships are not destined to be eternal. They will come to an end"

"Abuna, we, before the Abunas came to tell us about God being our Father and about Jesus being our Saviour from all evils, we had a firm belief in God. We were like Old Testament people; we believed that God cares for his creatures. He would one day listen to our prayers and put an end to our distress. This attitude was deepened and strengthened in us by what you shared about Jesus' love for us. Hence we are sure that our right to own our land and live in and in peace will one day materialize. It's a question of time and patience."

"The Sudan is our land and one day we will be recognized as such by all, Arabs included. Then our tribulations will come to an end."

This is a very poor summary of what I have heard, but it contains in it, like in a nutshell, the substance of their philosophy and theology; some might consider it naïve and superficial, but the more you look at it, the more convinced you became, that in its apparent elementary simplicity, there is a depth and solidity. It certainly has deep roots in them and makes them able to bear all they can bear with courage and serenity. Of course this philosophy and theology of theirs helps them to carry the heavy burdens and not to be crushed by them. Basing ourselves on their belief in God and in Christ the Saviour, we try to build on these foundations, as on rock, an edifice of natural and Christian optimism that may enable them to face all the challenges without crumbling.

But before I speak of this, let me tell you briefly how we try to help them solve their problems, at least some of them.

As regards to education of the younger people I have already mentioned St. Charles LWANGA School with its kindergarten and 8 grades. I have also noted that it provides education only for a limited number.

With funds obtained from Church Organizations. Once they leave this school, there is little we can do to assist financially the few who manage to join some private schools, except some occasional and small hand-outs?

As regards those who attend higher courses of studies and have lost the scholarship offered by the Sudanese and Egyptian governments, Caritas of the Middle East, to which we applied, has granted and distributes to them, through us, monthly sum that vary from 100-150/200 Egyptian pounds. It is certainly a help, but not one that solves all their problems.

What about medical care and its expenses?

We have reached an agreement with the Episcopal Church that, while we undertake to help as much as possible the children of St. Lwanga School and the grown up who attend higher courses, by sending them to some hospitals, if necessary, and paying for the medicines prescribed, the Episcopal Church gives what assistance it can for all other cases and peoples. Where from do we get the funds for this? Partly from those available from St. Lwanga School, partly from the scholarships assigned to students of higher schools, and very much by funds provided by generous benefactors, i.e. Divine Providence.

To provide for the daily needs, in any regular way, it is absolutely impossible for us: we just don't have means for it. I have explained above how the Sudanese in Egypt try to do it and how often they don't succeed in doing it and grow hungry for days and days. When this happen and they turn to us, then we sometimes and for extreme cases undo the strings that bound our purses and take out the widow offering and drop it into the begging hands. The same happens sometimes and, in extreme cases, with people, particularly with families which cannot pay their house rent. The Egyptians don't hesitate to evict such people and throw them into the street. There is only one other form of assistance given three or four times a year, when, individuals or families registered with us (they number about 2000 units, but some units consist of families and so the number of people who benefit from this kind of assistance is much higher than 2000) receive a certain amount of foodstuffs and some oil, supplied by Caritas and entrusted to us for distribution. But what is this in comparison with their daily needs?

There are other ways by which we try – and it seems to me – succeed in preventing them from falling along the way, as Jesus said about the crowds which followed him into the desert and were tired and exhausted. One of the most effective is the parish club. It consists of the courtyard I have already mentioned many times, and of a large room with a television set and tables for playing cards, dominoes and chess. The courtyard and room are thrown open at 3.00 p.m. and remain open till 11-11,30 p.m. Starting with the opening hour, the club begins to fill with people, earlier with grown-ups, later with children. The club room is out of bound for children who are not interested in cards games and others of the same type. The courtyard is at their disposal for the most informal and elementary types of games played with the most informal and elementary types of playing and with an enthusiasm, in comparison with which that of fans of the most famous stadiums in the world would seem a kind of anti-climax. And what makes this playing of the children more remarkable is that it goes on undisturbed by the groups of grown-up, that are scattered all over the same courtyard, standing or sitting, intent upon sharing and discussing their daily problems, thus unburdening themselves. In the meantime, the other grown-ups inside the club-room are unburdening themselves of their problems in another way: by watching television or playing cards or chess with the greater concentration, undisturbed by the deafening noise of the players at dominoes! Attached to the club, there is a small canteen where soft drinks (not alcoholic drinks) and sandwiches may be bought. That for some people may be the only food for that day!

Then we encourage cultural and educational activities. Among the cultural activities there are the many types of tribal dances and songs. They are organized by themselves. We encourage them by offering the church premises and giving some financial support. They are held on holidays, religious or civil, and other occasions, like weddings, of which during the last year we had about 20 in church. They dance with an abandon that involves the whole person, body and soul, and makes them forget their many worries. The deep sounds of the drums, the rhythmical repetition of musical motifs, shouted by all together, the ringing sound of the percussion band create an electrifying atmosphere that makes them forget the surrounding architecture and brings back to their memories their original landscapes with their characteristics. This is certainly one way by which they try to preserve their Sudanese identity, not only, but also to transmit it to their children. For it is surprising to see how little children, who had never seen the Sudan or anything characteristically Sudanese, are irresistibly attracted by these dances and this music and instinctively copy the rhythms of both.

Another activity which contributes both to distract their minds from their worries and helps them to preserve their identity is the study of their Southern Sudan Languages. During the school holidays the class-rooms, in the afternoon and till late at night, are turned into centers for the teaching the principal languages, like Dinka, Nuer, Bari etc... The attention with which language lessons are followed is not less than the intensity with which they dance. You may ask why we are so keen on helping the Sudanese keep their identity. Would it not be better to encourage them to forget it and to embrace Egyptian culture? All the more so. Since there seems to be no hope that they may return to a pacified Southern Sudan of the kind they are dreaming of, I have hinted more than once to the fact that the Egyptians do not welcome the Sudanese: hence it is not easy for the Sudanese to open out to the Egyptians. I have also said that the Sudanese have a rock like belief that they will, one day, however distant it may be, return to their land: it is this hope against hope that boosts them up. It would be cruel to destroy it. Let me also add that, while we encourage them to keep their identity, we do not equally encourage them to isolate themselves and to reject all chances they may have of enriching themselves by appropriating the values of other cultures, according to the sound principles of cultural anthropology. After reading this paragraph you will more easily understand why we don't encourage the Sudanese to migrate to other lands, especially to USA! the land of promise to all exiles! On the other hand, when it happens that any of them obtains an entry-Visa to USA or Canada, we rejoice with them for the feeble ray of hope that has penetrated the dark of their life.

You may cross out or jump the preceding paragraph with all its (apparent?) inconsistencies and return to consider other means by which we try to help the Sudanese refugees bear their plight. During the summer holidays we organize holiday camps on the Mediterranean Coast, where the different age groups may spend a few days, far from the humdrum of the suffocating atmosphere of the rest of the year in Cairo and its neighborhood. For the same reason we encourage them to organize picnics into the countryside, where for one day they could breathe a more respirable air than that of Cairo.

To help women, especially whose husbands have died, we cannot be of any assistance or do not want to be of any assistance, there is a Bakhita group (in honour of St Josephine Bakhita a Sudanese Canossian, beatified in 1992). It is composed of women on whose shoulders the burdens, I have described above, fall more heavily than on those of other people. At their meetings they discuss their problems and situation in the light of the spirit of the Blessed Bakhita, which means of the Gospel, encourage and support one another to find solutions. Their number is not large, but their spirit and their attitudes manage to filter out, of their small circle, and reach a much wider circle of women. Meditating on the word of God and praying together is one of the props which they love.

There is also a “Mahabba” (Arabic for love) group of people (mostly men). Their aim is practicing the work of mercy, corporal and spiritual. They become very busy at the time when food is distributed, preparing list of individuals and family groups, deciding what quota each is to be given, and finally distributing the quotas. This take a few days, when the Mahabba people spend the nights, preparing the individuals and family quotas, and the days distributing them. It is an admirable work even if not completely exempt from some irregularities! I cannot forget some other activities which, though they employ a limited number of people, radiate their influence on a much larger number. There is a tailoring and knitting workshop where clothes and dresses are tailored and t-shirts and pullovers are knitted using modern machinery. In one corner of it there is even a watch repairer’s table. And in one corner of the rooms of the former residence, you find machinery for dyeing the t-shirts knitted at the tailor shop with the most imaginative designs. Our last but not least is one of the rooms behind the apse of the church has been transformed into a computer room where various kinds of computer-work are done including the time-tables and booklets for our liturgical celebrations.

The mention of liturgical celebrations brings me to the last point of this report: our pastoral work with all its different aspects. There is a pastoral council that meets quickly to present and discuss all educational and cultural and strictly pastoral programmes and to take the necessary decisions. It is composed of one representative of each of the groups engaged in the various main activities, like Mahabba, Bakhita, Legion of Mary (which I forgot to mention before), catechists (whom I’ll mention below) of course the school etc.. Each group chooses its representative. The first time they meet they choose the chairman. The superior of the community of Vincentian Sisters who work in the Parish and the Parish-priest and his assistant (me) are also members. The meetings are very long and conducted according to the African style of interminable dialogue, which is allowed to flow unchecked.

You know very well what kind of association the Legion of Mary is. No need so of spending more words on it.

We have catechist classes for parents of newly-born babies and for children and adults who have to receive Baptism or First Communion or Confirmation. They are given by catechists who work on a voluntary basis. For couples who want to get married we have four preparatory meetings, in which we explain (or try to) the meaning of Christian Marriage. We have Bible Reading groups that meet twice a week. Bible reading is very inexact description of what takes place at such meetings. It is not just reading, but a gradual penetration into the meaning of the Word of God through seven steps, each going deeper and deeper into it, ending with personal prayers in which every participant shares with the others what the Lord has been telling him by His word! The participants don’t generally exceed the dozen (and are often fewer), but we feel that some power goes out of them (as the Gospel says it did out of Jesus) to influence others around them.

We follow personal problems and crisis through personal time consuming contacts, try to reconcile people when tribal difference tend to cause division among them, to admonish both young and elderly people, when they seem to be turning off the right path by relationships that risk endangering their moral life. We do it generally through the recognized tribal chiefs in their traditional African way.

And finally!!! We try to make everybody and the whole community enter into personal deep contact with Christ by our Liturgical Celebrations: the weekly Sunday Eucharist, the Bakhita and (now) Comboni festivities, the celebration of the great annual feasts, weddings and (this may sound queer, but it is true) funerals. I believe it is through such celebrations the our Sudanese faithful succeed in renewing their firm trust in the Lord, a trust that enables them to bear up under these otherwise crushing burdens and to look at the present and at their future, with hope. It is of course the word of God they listen to and

the Body and Blood of Christ which they receive, that nourish them and renew their energies. But a very important role in all this is played by the songs of the church choir in which the congregation shares enthusiastically. The choir meets for practice twice a week for a period of not less than two hours in preparation for ordinary Sunday celebrations and extra-ordinary Festivities.

I hope I have given you a fairly comprehensive idea of the composition, the problems, the activities of this small Sudanese enclave, surrounded by the enormous expanse of a land entirely different in its characteristics, and of how its inhabitants manage, not only to survive, but also to live a vigorous life of their own in its many aspects. Hence I believe I may (to use a choice expression of my former students in the Oxford class at Comboni College, Khartoum) “pen down” or down my pen. Also because I don’t want to test your patience and endurance any longer by my hieroglyphs.

Yours in Christ

Father Philip

PS. Don’t expect to write to you regularly particularly at such length.

Date 6/2/1997

Italian Hospital

Cairo