

WE LEFT LOVE BEHIND

Reflection on a Short Term African Visit

We left for Tanzania, East Africa the day after Thanksgiving, having prepared since the spring before. Our mission? To teach English to our African Salvatorian Sisters who were preparing to take a National English Exam. If they passed, they could continue studies toward a ministry in their country. If not, they would either re-take the test at great expense or remain as an aide in a Catholic kindergarten or dispensary. They were young, vibrant, talented Sisters with much potential. So our mission was practical and specific, clear and simple: prepare them for the test.

That was the mindset with which we left the U.S. But as soon as we reached the continent of Africa, things began to shift. The Sisters were busy with other worthy pursuits: retreat, meetings, doctor appointments, home visits, hoeing the garden, feeding the pigs and chickens, and warming the water on an outside wood fire pit for the breakfast instant coffee. It became clear that the expectations on the other end differed from ours. And each day, my Sister-companion and I asked, "What are we DOING here?" Our class size varied in number from 14 to 22 to 10 on some days, so the ideal of consistency was never met. We had come all this way, laden with two extra suitcases stuffed with handouts, stories, poetry, and 200 pens and pencils donated by Most Holy Trinity Parish in Tucson.

The up-side was an enjoyable relationship with our students from the first day. Our methods were often fun, and their motivation, effort and faith kept us going. We soon realized they learned communally. When one Sister seemed confused about directions given, a huddle formed around her, and rather than our repeating the information, they worked with her until she understood.

The diet was difficult and the heat extreme. Although we were immunized against malaria, the mosquitoes pursued us without mercy, and the flies were a constant aggravation. We received little news from home, except for blips about Tiger's infidelities. There was no visible sign of Christmas, so in desperation, I found one sheet of red and one sheet of green construction paper to make loop-garlands to decorate the classroom, only to discover that red and green have no special holiday significance there! Praying the Eucharist in Swahili twice a day left me cold, and I began to feel isolated, craving authentic Christmas joy.

But then it happened: After we had finished our classes and were headed back, we spent a few days with our community in Dar es Salaam, the bustling capital of Tanzania. One night we were sitting around talking, and a Tanzanian Sister looked us straight in the eye and spoke plainly in perfect English: "We know you love us!" Both of us were moved almost to tears. So THAT'S what we did here!

We had no way of knowing if irregular verb tenses, comprehension of poetry, or map skills would stick. But we had loved and that was the greater gift.

That insight leads me to the real message of this article. In January, we completed this year's reflection on the Christmas mystery, at least liturgically. It was all about Mary, in cooperation with the Holy Spirit, LEAVING LOVE BEHIND: Jesus' life for the world. And now, entering the Lenten season, we ponder, embrace and try to emulate WHAT JESUS LEFT BEHIND: the message, sacrificially communicated, that He did everything (including a generous ministry, dying, rising, and sending His Spirit) TO LEAVE LOVE BEHIND. Not a romantic feeling nor a nostalgic, misty kind of love, but a *flesh and blood, covenant-faithful love* that includes, forgives, and becomes our lasting Christian legacy.

During Lent, may our pray of praise be: "WE KNOW YOU LOVE US, Lord Jesus. May that conviction keep our love growing. Amen."

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