

ARRIVAL TO SUDAN

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Thanksgiving Day, November the 26th 2009, I arrived in Juba, Sudan to begin another adventure in my life. Never in my wildest dreams did I believe that I would be asked to work on a hobby that I have always had a passion for. I was contacted from Rome by my congregation of the Missionary Sons of the Immaculate Heart of Mary to consider working in construction for Solidarity with Southern Sudan in Wau, Sudan. When I was first approached for the position of project manager in June of 2009, I jumped to the opportunity, but I did not even know where Sudan was.

I arrived in Juba, on my favorite of all American holidays, Thanksgiving Day, and yes, I did miss the family gathering and all the goodies attached to that wonderful celebration. The trip from Rome, and especially the 5-6 hours spent in the airport at the capital of Ethiopia, Addis Ababa, was enough to exhaust anyone. The last time I had been in Africa was in Cameroon in the late 1980's, and now I felt that I was returning back home.

I spent only a few days in Juba and was hastily taken to Wau since the work there had already started and I was needed to supervise the construction of this huge nursing complex, the Catholic Health Training Institute. I remember landing in Wau and seeing the flying red dust, moved by the landing of the airplane, welcoming us to the airport. Then getting off and seeing what truly looked like no more than a pasture with nothing growing on it which was the airfield.

While we waited outside in the hot sun, a tractor with its hitched trailer was being loaded with our suitcases. All of us looked for some possible shade from the old dilapidated buildings. I had now reached Wau, and I was wondering if my suitcase had also arrived. There was my newly purchased suitcase sitting on its side on the trailer looking like it had just gotten dyed another color with the red dust.



The community where I was going to be living thought I was a religious Brother, and not a priest. My new community would consist of five Sisters: two Comboni Sisters, Dr. Maria Martinelli from Italy and Sister Esperance Bamiriyo from the Congo; two Sisters of the Holy

Spirit from India, Sister Sneha and Sister Estella; and Dr. Mary Anne Williamson, a Franciscan from the USA.

When I was given the title of pastor, I knew I could not be a “pastor” until I knew the people, where the money was, how it was used, and the right people to trust, etc. The same thing happened to me at the Catholic Health Technical Institute (CHTI) where I would be working on renovating the nurse’s school. Until I could figure out what I was supposed to be doing, where the money was, how we purchased the materials, and know the correct people, etc., I would only have the title of “project manager” but certainly would not know how to function correctly. I must say that it took almost one month before I felt that assurance. And then, when I did feel that assurance, I finally knew that my true work was more that of an animator to move others to do their work, and to do it correctly, not only that of a project manager.

It has been an eye opener to be part of a mixed group of religious women and men living and sharing together as a community. At times it has not been easy. Women and men really do think and react so differently. After about two weeks with only women in the house, I was feeling lonely and puzzled, but I did not know why. The Sisters were very kind to me, but something was totally missing. I finally figured it out that I was in need of comradeship with other men. I started associating and spending more time with the workers on the project and developed some great friends that seemed to understand my dilemma.



My greatest gift to this project has not really been the expertise of building, but rather of building a friendship with these workers who many times are not fully appreciated for what they do and how they do their work. They spend many lonely hours alone, and at times are forgotten by those who hire them. Many of them have come from Uganda to earn a living, and have left their country and families to come to find a decent job here in Sudan. I admire these men very much.



They are a group of mixed religions, but mostly Christian and Muslim. I have learned to admire all of them for their dedication to their religions and beliefs.

Every day I have tried to greet each one of the almost 80 men and women whom I have worked with. I actually do this three to four times a day. I have invented names for some of them, which they are so proud of: “the Manhole Man”, “Yambio from Yambio”, “the Monkeys”, “the Cigarette Man”, etc. Whenever I see them, I play a game with each one, asking if they are hiding or

working. I constantly tell them I appreciate their work, and correct them when they want to do a mediocre job. I want them to excel and be proud of their labor. I also tell them that if I were doing the work, I would have already finished by myself. Or that any fool could do that. They just laugh, and I believe that they are just grateful that I truly do appreciate their work. They are constantly on the ball, and start asking me now the same question: if I am hiding or working!



I respect their religious beliefs, and am amazed at their love and patience in their work and conditions. They laugh at me as I try to say something in Arabic or in their native languages. I will go to visit them in their quarters when they are ill and give them some of the Sister's medicines, and will even try to sing with them some of their songs and teach them Spanish when at night there is no relief from the suffocating heat, and no breeze to comfort any of us. We just sweat and sweat. I complain about the heat, they don't.

There have been many lessons that I have had to learn here with the Sisters and the workers. Some of the lessons are painful and others are joyous. But I could not grow without both. God, his mother Mary and St. Anthony Mary Claret have brought me here, and there is a reason as to why I have arrived in Wau under these circumstances and with these people. I have learned to never give up on anyone, no matter how difficult they may become towards me. Everyone is entitled to be wrong, and that certainly includes me also.

One of my spiritual giants when I was a novice told me something personally when I was praying before the Blessed Sacrament. He came over and blessed me, told me what I was thinking and then proceeded to tell me about the future. Some things he told me have happened; others are being formulated as I live out this adventure here in Southern Sudan. I do hope what he foretold will one day come true. I must tell you that I am extremely happy to be here and that if I died here, please just bury me underneath one of the big fig trees in our community house in Wau. May Mary continue to direct me as I do my work here in Southern Sudan. Blessings and may we all grow in holiness.