

## What Have I Learned?



I must ask myself, what have I learned in the last 6 months that I have been in Sudan, Africa? It is an answer that can include so many topics and you will see that I have included many of them in different ways. I have learned that women and men are different. Some of the Sisters here want even the rubbish of the construction to be in daily order. Men are not as tidy and neat as they are. I have learned that the Sisters I live with will sing anything at any time of the day; morning prayers, prayers before and after meals, evening prayers, etc. It is endless. Men don't want to have to wake up in order to sing nor do they want to sing when they have worked such long hours during the day. I have learned to carry 3 kilos of fried 1 inch termites in my airplane luggage because someone in Riimenze wanted his religious friends in Juba to have this great treat. Yuck. My luggage still smells horrible from those termites.

I have learned that when you see someone seemingly flipping you the finger, it is not one finger they are holding up, but rather all the fingers of a hand bunched up, which signifies to wait. And here I thought I had to retaliate. I learned that living poverty is not the same as being poor. The poor have no option and we as religious do have the options to live poorly or not. To be in solidarity with them is not always the same as being poor with them. I have learned that social justice encompasses more than just inventing more meetings and conferences. It means actually being among the people, aiding them, giving them your time, your money, your clothes, your food, etc. I have learned that social justice begins at home and not outside where others only see and hear you, and don't live with you.



I have learned that some people only want to control others. They feel that without their advice and information the world will fail miserably. That at the ripe age of 64 you still can't make good decisions without someone being around to tell you how, when and where. And that even includes that you will use a cloth napkin and not a paper one because everyone else does. It can all be crazy, for you see; they say they are doing it for your betterment, when in reality; it is only being done for their control. I have learned that not every smile is necessarily a sign of kindness, but can be a sign of pure dislike and disgust and a snippy way to get back at you.



I have learned that the Dinka tribe sings to their cows every day, and they would never consider selling them, or killing them since they are used as the bridal dowry for their sons to purchase a wife. A Dinka woman's selling price at present is now 100 cows, or over \$100,000.00 dollars! I wonder at times what they would think of a \$65 marriage license fee instead. I have learned that to wear red can signify that I am hostile and can hurt someone or even kill them. I have 2 red T-shirts which I don't

wear too often now. I have learned that even the poorest worker I have working for me may have a cell phone. And here I thought I would be having too much with my \$45 used cell phone which I bought in San Antonio, Texas. Surprise!

I have learned that the worse dry season I have ever spent on earth has been in Wau, Sudan. Not to have a breeze at night for almost 4 months makes you believe that you will surely suffocate one night, especially when the electricity is turned off at 2am, or worse, when there is no electricity. I have learned that we can actually live without electricity, without ice, without cold water, without frozen foods, without fresh vegetables, without many things and not die, but the thought of dying can seem pretty good when all you do is sweat and sweat all night long for 4 months. I have learned that to feel cool at nights, it is better to lie on the cool tile in the bathroom, except that you must share the space with crawling insects and lots of mosquitoes. I have learned that you are stupid to wear white clothes in this endless red dust that enters your room daily and stains your white items dull

red/brown. I have learned that we must use the Wau Town water supply which comes from the Jur River and which is not treated. It is muddy and dirty from the people bathing in it, the hippos swimming in it, the cows, goats and sheep drinking and doing their business in it. In my first few showers I thought I was the dirtiest person on earth, until I noticed it was the water I was showering with. I now just shower and don't look at the water anymore, but I have learned not to gargle with it.



I have learned that in construction here in Africa when we are told it will be done by such and such a day, just add a few more months to those days. You see, many of the supplies must be shipped in from Kampala, Uganda, Nairobi, Kenya, or just north of us, Khartoum the capital of Sudan and none of the roads would pass for highways. Then there are those unexpected government holidays that just appear so unexpectedly, not to mention the Christian and Muslim

holidays. I have learned to tolerate the Muslim's prayers even before 5pm and sometimes feel like just counting them as my own morning prayers since they woke me up. I have learned to be called a Kawajah, or white man, or even a Niggaw Kawajah, or white dude wearing Levis and a cap and looking like a hood.

I have learned that the best anti heat rash ointment is not even an ointment, but Johnson and Johnson Baby Powder. Every day you will find another bite, another rash, another red mark on your body. At night you may look like a ghost, but you will feel so much better knowing that 90 percent of the rashes go away with Johnson and Johnson. And here I thought it was only for a baby's little butt. I have learned if you travel more than 5 hours, take toilet paper. You will not find an Exxon or a



MacDonald's anywhere and least of all, a decent road. Potholes for the next 400 kilometers, is a safe statement. I have learned not to expect to use my visa card in any of the places here. I have never seen an ATM machine so I have never used my visa card. They will not accept \$100 dollar bills unless they are printed in the year 2006 or later. And if you have fewer denominations than \$100 dollar bills, you will be given less for those smaller bills. Local banks that are credible just don't exist. The bank we use is the Kenyan Commercial Bank. The bank which I must use is good ole trustworthy Western Union, which only functions for me in Juba, and not here in Wau. I have learned that the prices in Southern Sudan are some of the highest prices in Africa. Thank God for my benefactors and family who surprise me with packages that take 1 and a half months to reach me and then we must pay a duty on this side also. It truly is Christmas for me though when packages reach me and I have learned to share it with anyone standing next to me. I have learned that it is better to give than to receive.

I have learned not to complain when I am eating food. My workers and a lot of the people around me hardly ever get meat. My 70 some workers eat medida, maize porridge, for the morning break and then beans and pocho, like polenta, for lunch, and then pocho and beans for the variation in the evening meal. This has been going on for over 6 months now. Rarely are there vegetables and meat. How could I complain? I have learned not to eat everything which my eyes see and my nose smells on the streets. I had the worse diarrhea for 5 days because I ate chapattis, which are the closes things to a Mexican flour tortilla at the worse little tin stand. The dirty building should have told me something already.





I have learned that religious men and women can work together in different projects. I may not always feel blessed among 5 women, but they are my community and somehow we manage and care for each other. I have learned that to travel by plane is not quite like in the USA. Sometimes the small plane must swoop down to scare the goats or the people crossing the airstrip before we land. I have learned that if I wear my Claretian crucifix, someone will automatically know that I am an Abuna, a

Priest, and greet me or even better yet, not have to search my baggage with my dirty underwear and socks, etc. I have learned that being a Priest does not exempt me from washing my own clothes. I don't think my clothes ever get that clean now since I started washing them, but I have learned not to iron anything either. My Levis are my trade mark and to wash them always gives me more work. I have learned to rinse all my clothes by ringing then by hand. I wonder if there is a better system. I have learned to use multicolored T-shirts with at least one pocket for my glasses and pens. I have learned that the elastic on my underwear stretches out more as I ring them out. The dark green ones are now light green and the elastic on them has started to stretch so they droop around my waist. I certainly am not losing weight. I have learned that in the rainy season I must wear what they call gum boots, or rubber boots. If not, you will never make it in or out of anywhere you step. I have learned that even though I took medicines for prevention of malaria, I will get it one day. It is not a matter of getting it or not, but when? I have learned that an old priest can get Herpes Zoster, shingles, by having been exposed to chicken pox as a child, be the ripe age of over 60 and be stressed out in his work. Sudan was the worse place for me to have gotten this illness. There was so little relief due to few medicines, nothing cool or cold at times, no fan, humidity, the itching, etc. If I suffered, I have learned that the poor suffer even worse. How shameful of me to complain.

As you can see, I can continue to share even more of what I have had to learn while being a missionary in Sudan, Africa. Even though you many think many of the things I learned were complaints, I would do it all over again. I learned long time ago that I was born to be a foreign missionary and no matter where I go, I have always tried to immerse myself in all the aspects of life. I know I am not good enough to be a Priest, nor a Missionary Son of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, but I have learned that I was called to become one and to also become a saint with or without my weaknesses and strengths. I do not like what I do, I love what I do. December 8, 2009 was my 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary as a Priest which I celebrated quietly here in Wau, Sudan, and I ask Mary, her Son Jesus, St. Joseph and St. Anthony Mary Claret to let me continue in my work as long as I can learn more and to change more. I have learned from Blessed Mother Teresa of Calcutta, that I too can help this world, one person at a time.

Please continue to pray for me and all the other missionaries who left their countries to somehow try to make this world a better place for others to live in. I have learned that great missionaries like St. Daniele Comboni and others gave their lives so that Africa one day would be converted.

Blessings, Padre Alberto M. Ruiz, CMF

Sunday, June 6, 2010, The Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ, Wau, Sudan, Africa