

Christmas mass in a refugee camp of Northern Uganda

That Christmas was the first time I celebrated Mass in a refugee camp. Here I am, at 6:00 in the morning, riding my bicycle towards the Okidi chapel, close to the mission of Ngetta. People are beginning to arrive, little by little, while a group of children are already whirling around the Crib put up by the youth.

What a joy to see these children well dressed up, the girls in their long coloured skirts and picturesque hats and the boys in their new shoes and festive clothes; some of them even wearing a tie that reaches down to the feet (how much British culture still lingers on in Uganda!). It is so heart-warming to greet these people sporting their best clothes as they walk to the church. They are surprised to see old "Padi Morris" on his bicycle so early in the morning! It is a pretty cool day, which is a blessing, because when the chapels fill up with people – low as they are – they become like furnaces. We are in the dry season, and that means that the sun rays are merciless. The traditional western "White Christmas" does not apply here.



Young people on a day of celebration



A Village in Uganda

The chapel is surrounded by a disorderly tangle of huts that is painful to see. Since I am early, I go to greet people in their homes: children are running up and down, while the tots are being washed by their mums in small pails. Some of them, as they see me, run away screaming. It is the price I have to pay for having a white skin. I begin the Mass and enter the chapel dancing, rocking a small boy in my arms. People understand well what I am doing, smile and applaud. The women

start to ululate. Those most interested in what is going on are, naturally, the children. I have to bend down and show them the baby. They look with surprised eyes. "This is Baby Jesus", I tell them, and I hear their comments: "He is black, like us." I explain to them that it is truly so, because Jesus takes the colour of the people among whom He is born. He is like us in everything, but He is, at the same time, the Son of God. For the first time in a month we sing the Gloria, a very long song, accompanied by the beating of drums, hand clapping once again, by the joyful ululating. I choose the reading of the birth of Jesus from the Gospel of Luke because I want to point out the fact that Jesus was a refugee before us; a refugee who revealed himself to the shepherds, considered foul and worthless people. I ask them if they are also bad people and they say "no".

Jesus is still a refugee

Jesus made himself a refugee to prove that the circumstances that cause exile and incomprehension do not come from Him, but they are human. Naturally, these people will never think that God has sent them the curse of the war; but it is good for them to be confirmed in their faith. God manifests himself to the shepherds, not to the President, or the Temple's priests or the rich. All in the congregation applaud enthusiastically. "What do we ask, then, of the new-born Jesus?" I ask them. The answer is clear: "Peace!" Some speak of a change of heart, of overcoming divisions, of love among us; surprisingly nobody speaks about material things. These are simple people and consumerism has not yet planted its roots here.

Then the moment of the offertory, a most joyful time in the celebration, arrives. People approach the altar with their offerings dancing: some bring coins, an egg, a corn cob, a sorghum spike, a bowl of beans, etc. Everything is then taken to the back of the church, from where it is brought to the altar dancing. Among the Lango, it is a traditional dance with a very lively rhythm and quick hand clapping.



A proud mother with her new born child

While the girls dance making twirls, the boys jump and stamp with force their feet. The adungu and the xylophones sound and make the beats go faster and faster till they reach a vertiginous speed, then the priest presents the offerings to God. The small children are also offered to the Father of life, while the congregation repeats three times: "gwoke!" (protect him!). After the final blessing, I conclude saying that the Mass is ended and that "aool oko" (= I am now really tired!). All laugh and applaud. We return home with the joy of believing that the Lord is with us. I could not forgo, naturally, the admonition of avoiding drinking not to spoil such a beautiful feast... finally, a last applause and more beautiful (and long) carols, accompanied by the ululating of their throats. I hope these lines may help to revive the happiness of Christmas, in the light of Christ who has been born again among us!

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This article is taken from NEW PEOPLE magazine (December 2007). We need your support to make the magazine accessible to students who are too poor to pay for it. We take this opportunity to wish you all pupils and teachers a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year.

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