

A journey of painful discovery

Joan Chittister | Mar. 21, 2012 From Where I Stand

"There is meaning in every journey," Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, "that is unknown to the traveler." I travel a great deal. I travel more often and miles further than most of the people I know. Trust me: Bonhoeffer knew of which he spoke. That statement is not only true, it is life-changing. When we learn what we are not looking for, that kind of education reshapes the soul.

I discovered long ago that whatever part of any trip I presumed would have the major impact on me, I would almost invariably wind up discovering something completely other than what I thought I was going to get.

For instance, I went to Rome for church meetings years ago and discovered the difference between Jesus and the institutional church. I went to Japan for a Buddhist conference and discovered the living victims of the Hiroshima atomic bomb instead. I went to South Africa to be part of programs for women religious there and discovered that South Africa's whites had not a clue that it was their own apartheid policies that accounted for what they considered the deterioration of South African society after apartheid.

In fact, what I'm not looking for when I travel often lasts longer in the folds of my heart than the information I sought in the first place.

I know that's true because it just happened again a little while ago.

In what we once called "mission territory," in an African land only sparsely Christian where the presence of the church is built on the works staffed and subsidized for years by religious congregations that were basically white, basically European, I got a whole new look at life. These are people whose congregations have been in an area for decades before the place was even on a map. They know the geography and its populations from the ground up. Some of them had arrived in the territory before there were villages there, before there were colonial governments, before there were roads, let alone major cities, and certainly before there was independence.

They know its customs and taboos. They know its internal history. They know its family structures and economic systems and relationship networks. They know what life looked like for these people before some foreigners came along and "fixed it" for them.

In this case, the sisters had been teaching and nursing these same people for almost 100 years. They had watched their children being born and their ancestors being buried and their corn being ground and their animals being yoked to haul and plow and carry for generations. It was a place where people had no experience of any other way to live until white business interests came promising them wealth and development.

"How are things going here?" I asked the two sisters. The school was twice as large as it had been when I was here last, they said. The novitiate had grown. People came to the clinic by the hundreds. They were opening another clinic, they smiled, further out in the valley with a surgeon and a resident anesthesiologist. "What kinds of cases do you see most?" I asked.

There was a pause, a lowering of the voices. "We get so many cases of AIDS," they said sadly. "Most of the cases are women now. More women than men. And the children, of course, who are born with it."

"But why the women?" I pressed them.

They looked at me intently for a moment. Said nothing. Looked down again.

"Why?" I asked again.

"Well," the older sister went on, "the men are taken to work sites for long periods and so the companies bring in women to ... to 'service' them, you know," she said, looking at me again to be sure I understood what they meant. "Then they come back and infect the wife. Condoms -- are not allowed."

I groaned inwardly and shook my head. There had been a flurry in November 2010, when the pope in an interview was understood to have mused about the use of condoms to avoid infection. Many theologians, some very prominent bishops and an international body of health care personnel had applauded the move. But by the next day, of course, Vatican spokesmen had "clarified" the statement to mean that it had simply reasserted a continuing ban on the use of condoms in any situation, all serious dissent from every level of the church across the world notwithstanding. What was this kind of morality that could sanction one kind of murder in the name of honoring life and preventing another?

"Why?" I said, thinking out loud and looking out over their heads to the throngs on the pavement outside. "Explain to me why my church cavalierly allows these women and their children to die rather than actually insist that morality demands that these men use condoms. Are women's lives expendable? Is this sexism at its worst? Is the morality of contraception greater than the morality of life? How can they call that kind of theology holiness and the people who have doubts about it heretics for having the effrontery to ask an obvious question?"

The conversation had gone dumb, gone mute, gone aphasic. The nuns said nothing. Nothing at all. But when I looked up, to my eternal wonderment, I saw that they both had tears in their eyes.

"They know," I thought. "They know."

From where I stand, that was the new insight discovered in this journey that changed the way I see life.

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