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Missionary to Africa finds images of God among the poorest and least

Sr. Camille D'Arienzo | Aug. 7, 2012 Conversations with Sr. Camille

"For her witness to the Ignatian desire to see and choose Christ in the world, for her more than three decades of service to the poorest and least among us at home and abroad, and for her creativity in health education and leadership, Gonzaga University is proud to confer on Marjorie Humphrey its highest honor, the DeSmet Medal."

So concluded the lengthy tribute during Gonzaga's commencement ceremony on May 12 in Spokane, Wash. The courageous, generous, creative service Marj has rendered since she was received as a Maryknoll lay missioner in 1988 is the stuff of novels and documentaries, of breathtaking movies and television series.

Sr. Camille: You've been described as having spent your life in human service work as a health care provider, health educator and leader in the Maryknoll community. But before that, you were a child born and raised in Idaho. What was that childhood like?

Humphrey: I was raised in a hospitable and fun-loving family. I have two brothers and a sister. My parents wanted everyone to feel welcome in our home. We grew up with a lot of relatives nearby and we all spent a lot of time together, most often up in the mountains, fishing for trout and cooking over campfires.

Music has always been very important, and my siblings and other relatives are talented, so our family gatherings always include a lot of time to sing together, dance, play cards and cook -- and eat!

Who were your role models?

It was a great privilege to have known and lived in community with Dorothy Day for two years. I've also learned from people from my university days, my hospice days, my Catholic Worker family and my Maryknoll family.

You arrived at New York's Catholic Worker equipped with bachelor's degrees in religious studies and communications and master's degrees in guidance and counseling. When did your faith lead you to choose to serve Christ in ever-evolving ways?

I suppose it all started when I was in a public high school in Idaho, attending a weekly religion course in my parish. Our teacher, a lovely young woman, told us she was going to Peru with "papal volunteers in service to

Latin America." I was in ninth grade and thought that someday I'd like to do that. But over the years, I more or less forgot about it until I was challenged again in my faith as a student at Gonzaga University. The superior general of the Jesuits, Fr. Pedro Arrupe, had just published his famous document called *Men for Others*. A year later, I had the great fortune to hear Dorothy Day address the Eucharistic Congress in Philadelphia. It was Aug. 6, 1976, the Feast of the Transfiguration and the anniversary of the U.S. bombing of Hiroshima. Her address took my breath away. Eventually I left Spokane to spend a number of years living at the New York City Catholic Worker community. It was during that time that Jane Sammon and I traveled to Mexico for CELAM II, the Latin American bishops' conference. Afterward, we spent a month in El Salvador.

What was that like for you?

As I am sure you know, that was such a horrific time for the people of that country, but we heard Archbishop Oscar Romero speak three different times. He was a great sign of hope for the people there. His Sunday homilies from the cathedral were broadcast over the radio. I remember one Sunday, while staying with a Salvadoran family, we hunkered down on the kitchen floor, with the sound down low and our ears pressed close to the radio. One never knew if a neighbor or passerby might be an informant. Anyone caught listening to his homilies could be arrested and worse.

In 1980, Archbishop Oscar Romero was murdered. A few months later, Dorothy Day died in her room at the Catholic Worker. Three days later, the four churchwomen, including the two Maryknoll sisters, were killed in El Salvador. It was a very emotional, powerful, heart-wrenching time to be part of the "peace and justice" church, a time I'll never forget.

During those Catholic Worker years, a group of us became very good friends with three Maryknoll sisters who were living lives of voluntary poverty in a tenement apartment in NYC just a few blocks from the Catholic Worker. That relationship changed my life.

Did you ever consider being a Maryknoll sister?

I am quite certain that if I had ever felt the calling to be a religious sister, I would have asked to enter the Maryknoll sisters. I have the deepest respect and admiration for them, and one of my true role models was the Maryknoll sisters' first doctor, Sr. [Mary] Mercy Hirschboeck. I came to know her and be inspired by her while living at the Catholic Worker. Mercy was quite elderly and frail by then, but she wanted to live out her life among the poor. She chose to live a semi-contemplative life in a tenement apartment on Avenue C in New York City -- the area called Alphabetland. It was then known for its crime, drugs and violence. She knew the people of that community, and they knew her as a prayerful presence in that neighborhood.

Could you say something about the strong people you met in Africa?

Yes, I need to add to my role models the Irish missioners with whom I shared life for many years. In both Kenya and Sudan, we worked with priests from the Society of St. Patrick and Sisters of the Medical Missionaries of Mary from Drogheda, Ireland. ... They always kept a smile in their hearts, a warm cup of tea in their hands for everyone, a joke at the ready, and they asked little or nothing for themselves.

There are many Africans as well, and I want to mention two in particular. One is Lucy Wairimu Mwangi, who was our head nurse at the Kitale [Kenya] AIDS program. Her total and complete compassion, care and kindness to people with HIV/AIDS inspired me as she stood out in a culture where there is tremendous stigma regarding the disease. She had a special way with children and I know that without her, our pediatric AIDS program wouldn't have succeeded.

The second is a Ugandan sister of the Evangelizing Sisters of Mary, Sr. Divina Musimire. She lived and worked in a clinic in a very rural area an hour's drive away from us. Divina traversed every nook and cranny of that parish on foot. If she found someone sick and hungry, she'd walk all the way back to the convent, cook a pot of beans or stew and then carry it back to them. I did medical consulting at her clinic twice a month, and every time I went, she would bring to me unbelievably sick or disabled people that she had "found" on her parish rounds. Through her, I met a family of "children raising children" because both parents had died of AIDS. Divina took me out to this broken-down mud-and-thatch hut. When we arrived, 6-year-old Brenda was outside doing the family laundry. Also, she did all the cooking and care for her 4-year-old brother. There were two older boys, aged 11 and 12, who hired themselves out every day to farmers for day labor to earn something to pay for their food. What was so beautiful was how much Divina was loved by the people in her village and parish. Children flocked to her, wherever she went, calling her name and wanting her to hold and hug them.

Do you have a favorite scripture passage?

First of all, I have to say that one of the greatest gifts of my time in Kenya and Sudan was that I began to see scriptural readings through fresh eyes. I was living life in very rural places, much closer to the way it was in Jesus' time. Daily experiences of "women at the well," shepherds and their flocks, fishermen with nets on the shores, rickety boats on stormy seas, dusty feet in sandals -- the images are so real and rich to me now.

One of my favorite scripture passages, since my time in Kenya, is the story of the Good Shepherd. How Jesus, time and again, goes after the one who strays, even leaving the others to do so. In Kenya, it's the job of young, even small boys, to tend the flocks. In one very remote, hot desert area where we worked, there was a large nomadic pastoral tribe that took very tender care of their animals. The only vehicles in the area belonged to the missionaries, a couple of aid workers, and an occasional government official passing through. And it was 110 degrees in the shade.

Every time I drove from a mobile clinic back to our house, we'd pass flocks of goats and sheep being tended by small boys. As soon as a vehicle approached, the sound of the engine would scare the animals and they'd take off in all directions. So these young fellows would have to run to gather them back. But before they did that, they'd wait for us to pass, smiling beautiful, beaming smiles as they'd wave to us. This happened sometimes two or three times a day. And I used to think, if these little boys could smile and wave and not get impatient or annoyed at us for constantly scattering their sheep and goats, and then cheerfully go after them, how much more patient and loving must God be, to go after each one of us time and time again when we stray. These little shepherds have given me such a wonderful, concrete image of a loving, patient and forgiving God

How would you sum up your 17 years in Africa?

I heard that a missionary in East Africa once said, "When you have been in Africa for a year, you can write a book. When you have been there five years, you can write a chapter, and when you have been there 15 years you struggle to even write a paragraph." That is kind of where I am at with it. The longer you are there, the more complex you realize it all is, and you don't even know where to begin in order to do justice to people there. "Africa" is a continent with more than 50 countries. The country of Kenya alone is home to 49 different tribes,

each with its own language and culture. The Sudan, where I also served when that country was still embroiled in war, is huge, and very complex and tragic. Their more than 35-year civil war is often portrayed simply as a "holy war," the Christian South against the Muslim North. But isn't it really mostly about oil and greed and power? And within the Southern Sudan, there were multiple factions also fighting one another. There were atrocities by the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) as well as the Khartoum government, like the forced conscription of 11- and 12-year-old boys into the army. One of our nurses had her 11- and 12-year-old sons taken out of their beds at night. Our area was also raided a number of times by Joseph Kony's Lord's Resistance Army. They abducted some of the girls from our little mission school. The LRA was working with the Khartoum government at the time.

That violence must have been terrifying.

The war years left a mark on me that I'm still trying to come to terms with. The age-old questions of evil and the suffering of the innocent are never so boldly shouted, I think, as in situations of war. I cannot fathom how, in 2012, after centuries of war, genocide and mass murder, modern cultures cannot come up with another way of resolving conflicts. I don't think you ever get over seeing innocent children maimed and killed by war and the effects of war. After that experience, I had to return to the U.S. to try to somehow come to terms with it all and make some semblance of "recovery" from it. I was having terrible nightmares and [post-traumatic stress disorder]-like symptoms. Yet at the same time, I felt terribly guilty for leaving for a time. I was the privileged person who had choices and could leave. I remained in the U.S. for three years after the wartime experience, and then returned to Kenya.

How were you able to go on?

Amazingly enough, it was children suffering with and dying from AIDS who healed me. Their courage and ability to love and enjoy life, in spite of tremendous personal suffering, really restored my hope and faith in humanity and God.

What were the Africans' gifts to you?

They taught me many things -- to laugh at myself and to be patient. There is a Swahili proverb, "Haraka haraka haina baraka," literally meaning, "Hurrying things is not blessed." They taught me to take things slowly, listen and spend time with people and answers to problems will come. Relationships are their primary value -- relationships with family, friends, neighbors, one's ancestors and with God.

Marj, how do you pray?

Many different ways; with ritual and meditation, to be sure. But I sometimes just let my work that day be my prayer because when I get home, I feel exhausted.

I love the Jesuit prayer form of using imagery, imagining situations, and what would happen if Jesus was present in that scene. But my favorite form of prayer? Ankle-deep in a cold mountain stream fishing for trout. It's the most meditative place for me and a place and posture where I find myself better able to "listen" to God than anyplace else I know. Those beautiful mountains, forests, streams that we are so blessed with in the Pacific Northwest are the most beautiful cathedrals I know.

[Mercy Sr. Camille D'Arienzo, broadcaster and author, narrates *Stories of Forgiveness*, a book about people whose experiences have caused them to consider the possibilities of extending or accepting forgiveness. The audio book is available through the book's website, storiesofforgiveness.com [1].]

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