

Missionaries and mystics

Pat Marrin | Apr. 24, 2008

THEY COME BACK SINGING: FINDING GOD WITH THE REFUGEES

An African Journal by Gary Smith

Loyola Press, 226 pages, \$14.95

Two kinds of specialized spiritual writing nourish the larger church: Mystics go inward to probe the core truths of the faith; missionaries go outward to explore its growing edges. In *They Come Back Singing: Finding God with the Refugees*, Jesuit Fr. Gary Smith offers us a remarkable mix of the two. With letters and journal entries written during his six-year sojourn with Sudanese refugees in northern Uganda, he unveils the human face of Christian faith in one of the most desolate mission outposts in the world.

Outsiders know Sudan from media images of the refugee camps in Darfur. But this is only the more recent violence in a nation still struggling to resolve a long civil war (1983-2005) that killed an estimated 2 million people and displaced 4 million more. Among the displaced were hundreds of thousands of mostly Christian refugees who spilled over into northern Uganda. There, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees set up camps. Fr. Smith, fresh from eight years working among the homeless in Portland, Ore., came to the camps in 2000 as part of Jesuit Refugee Services, established in 1980 by Jesuit Superior General Pedro Arrupe in response to the plight of refugees worldwide.

Readers should be prepared for a daunting ride through a bleak landscape beset by weather-related and human-induced disasters that include poverty, disease and marauding rebels who kidnap children to be soldiers and sex slaves. But, through Fr. Smith's eyes, readers also witness the astonishing faith of the Sudanese refugees, who seem able to turn their desperate existence into a celebration of God's providence and care. We are introduced to Andalinda Yayo, the blind, crippled mother of one of the village catechists. In describing Andalinda, Fr. Smith asks, "Where are the mystics of this world?" and then answers his question: "I'd put my money on Yayo. She seems to live in a state of what St. Ignatius would call consolation without cause. In other words, she is always in the presence of the heart of God."

We meet Flabius, a man who lost eight children to disease and the war, witnessing to his faith and being embraced by his entire village.

Fr. Smith tries to describe to an American visitor the African church he has experienced. "I could only tell her what I saw: a communitarian church, a sense of God as absolute, contagious liturgies, and the centrality of the Eucharist. ... It comes down to being with the poor and living on the edge; such living renders me more open to love, to compassion."

It is this deeper dimension of faith that Fr. Smith focuses on as Africa's gift to the larger church: "Africa, with its blazing energy and its different history and its multiplicity of cultures, will emerge and touch the entire body of Christ. I realize that I am eager to be in on that unfolding dynamic."

Through this book we, too, may catch a glimpse of the future.

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