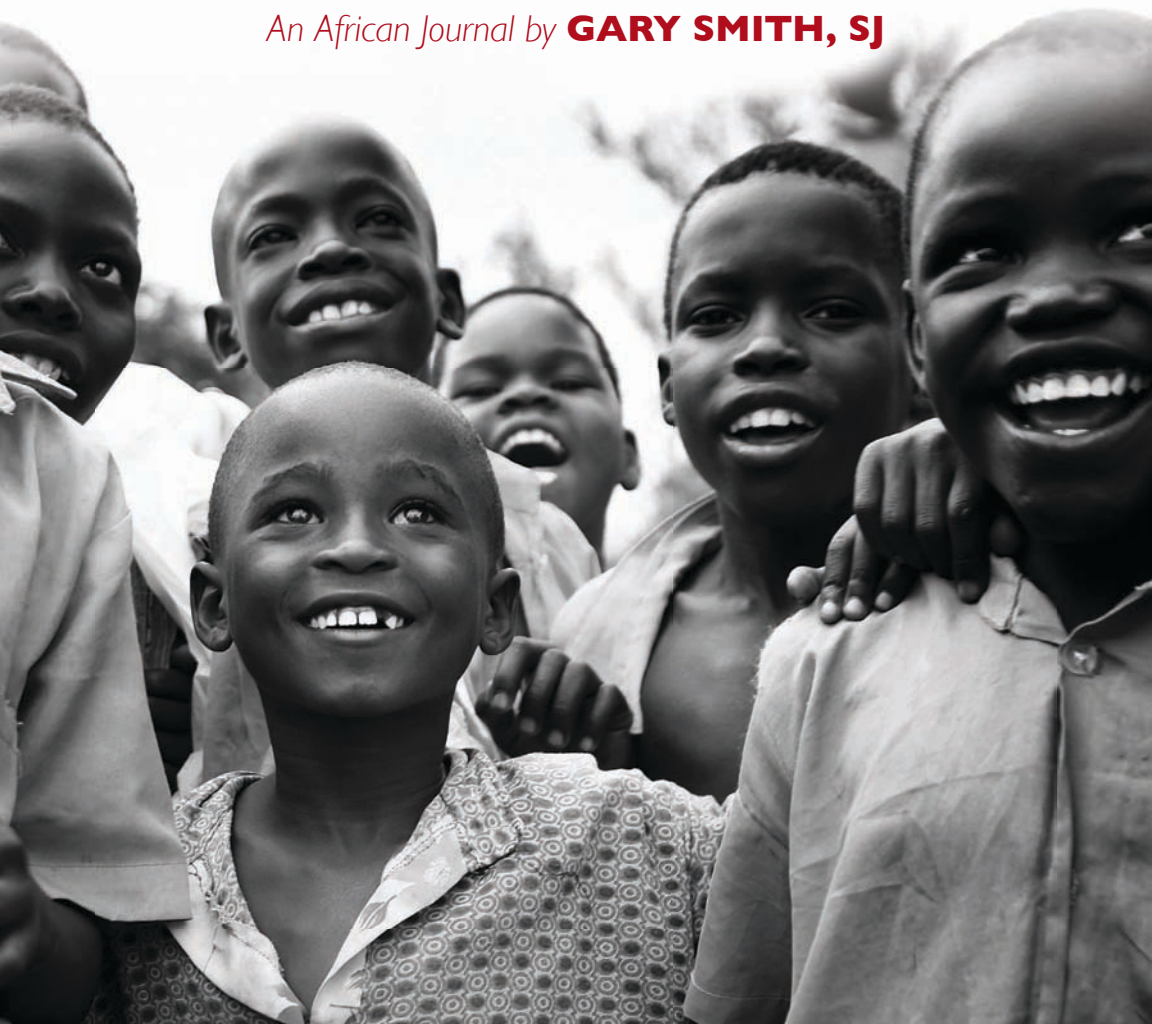


THEY COME BACK *Singing*

Finding God with the Refugees

An African Journal by **GARY SMITH, SJ**



Letter from Mwanza, Tanzania

Dear B.,

Hi. I write this at the southern tip of Lake Victoria in Tanzania, where I am attending a meeting of pastoral agents in JRS Eastern Africa countries: Uganda, Sudan, Tanzania, Kenya, and Ethiopia. It has been an opportunity to stand back and assess things, which I needed to do as I head into the homestretch of my time in Rhino. In the evening, we dine at a little village restaurant on the beach and have some delicious tilapia.

I have reflected on what I have been doing and will try to answer your question about my work.

For the past several months, my staff and I have been organizing and conducting a series of one-day and three-day seminars for our refugee church leadership: catechists; people involved in the care of the sick and aged; youth, women, and liturgical leaders; chapel chairpersons; facilitators of Small Christian Communities (gatherings of people in the villages who meet regularly to read and study Scripture); and those developing small businesses. In general, we have realized our goals, and the next four months will be a time of much pastoral work within the villages and follow-up on the seminars.

We hold the three-day seminars at the training facility located three miles from the JRS compound. Actually, “training facility” is perhaps a bit elaborate: it consists of one classroom, a latrine, a small kitchen for open-fire cooking, a storage room, and a couple of outdoor benches that we use for group discussions. The seminars are humbling. There are

many challenges: language issues (determining which one to use and arranging for translators), illiteracy, sickness (malaria hits two or three people at every seminar), lack of electricity, crying babies (who come with their moms), the long distances to the facility from people's home villages, rain and heat, lack of running water, insects and poisonous reptiles, simple food (beans and flour and a little cabbage and dried fish), sleeping arrangements in the seminar room (we have to partition off the room since men and women both attend), and a few thousand other things. The logistics of such seminars are daunting, but fortunately my staff is smart and well organized. "That's why I pay you guys the big bucks," I joke with them.

Our ministry involves more than just organizing seminars and teaching theology, of course. I also have a lot of one-on-one meetings with people in the settlements. Tuesdays are difficult, because that is when I see the many people who come to us for assistance. One of the last people I saw last week wanted money to purchase sugar and tea for the large gathering of people who would come to mourn a death in his family. I had been giving out assistance all day and was becoming irritable, mildly put off by so many wanting money or supplies.

The man standing before me was in his mid- to late twenties, thin, sad. He had a strong handshake and the coarse skin of a person who has worked in hard labor all his life. He came to us for supplies for the funeral of his nine-month-old daughter, Viola, who died of pneumonia complicated by a severe case of malaria. I informed him, in one of my more arrogant comments as JRS project director, that we could not take financial responsibility for every funeral. I shall never forget the look of bewilderment on his face, bringing into stark relief the small-mindedness of my comment.

I stopped myself, my heart impaled by his look. I asked him if she was his only child.

He said, “No, this is the fourth child.”

“And the others?” I asked.

“Dead also, Father, all in the first year of their lives. I myself and my wife are nearly dying with grief.”

It was a direct hit. The rubble of my arrogance was scattered everywhere. Feeling like the consummate jerk, I mumbled something about how sorry I was. Imagine: four children. Dead. His own. His all. The horror of it.

I turned to Atibuni, who was translating. “Give him anything he needs.”

The young man shook my hand again with his leathery hands. He thanked me and was gone with Atibuni.

Things like this happen here. I am learning.

Please don't worry about me so much; what is important is that you pray for me and for my people here. God has the ultimate hand in everything. I hear the drums of death nearly every week, part of the mourning and burial ritual of native Ugandans. The drumming can last for three days and nights. But even surrounded by death, I am reminded of the wealth of life.

And there is abundant new life. Recently, two midwives from a nearby village came to ask if I could take Mary, a young orphan woman I know and love, to a clinic; she had gone into labor with her first child. I drove for two hours over bad roads looking for an open clinic, with Mary and the two faithful midwives in the backseat. Bumping along, nervously looking over my shoulder at the hard-breathing mother-to-be, whose contractions were coming at shorter intervals, I tried to say something in Arabic to support her, but I was nervous and all I could manage was “Have a nice day.” I was prepared for a backseat delivery, but we made it to an open clinic, and shortly after we arrived the baby was born. A boy. Mary named him Gary, because of my involvement

in the delivery. My name sounds kind of goofy next to the Sudanese surname (Ondoa), but who cares. So now, as far as I know, there is one Gary in a settlement of thirty-five thousand. Not too long ago, a mother came to me shortly after she had given birth to a daughter, on the day I said Mass in her village. She asked the name of my deceased mother. So somewhere in the villages is a young girl named Eunice.

More life in abundance: about two weeks ago, a gift duck (from the mothers in a village where I baptized a dozen kids) hatched—count them—thirteen ducklings in our compound. Oh, the sight of that mother duck majestically strolling out of the nesting area, her fluffy, peeping, black and yellow little guys in tow. I stood gawking, the whole scene a light in the darkness. I, Mr. City Boy, was the most excited out of the whole staff. It is no big deal to Africans—they've been there, done that. If there had been cigars, I would have passed them around.

I love you and miss you.

Gary