87. Time for God

On Monday morning, Sisters Rosa and Joana, and I, drove to Makpandu to the Congolese refugee camp where there are many desperately poor people. We joined them in 7:00am prayer in their grass-roofed church with rough-cut poles for support, construction-engineered not by calculation and precision but by the accumulated, practical skills of people who have learned how to cope and survive on very little. It was a time of special prayer as the Congo was that day electing a new president. There was no provision for voting here by this forgotten people who long for a better world - even if it is in prayerful hope rather than by ballots cast.

Their long-time pastor and provider of aid, Father Mario, is presently in Italy. So the catechists conducted the service in which about eighty people participated. At the end I was surprised when invited to say a few words. So I greeted them, in my limited French which most of the adults seemed to understand, and told them we were praying for them and for the Congo on this day. It was unusually cool but many were dressed only in very flimsy ragged clothing. That is all they have. While Fr Mario is away, Sr Rosa ensures cartons of biscuits plus rice and sugar are periodically taken to the camp. We assist them a little when we can and they are most appreciative people.

But there is no forlornness or lack of spirit there. They are happy to be together, singing, listening, and giving time to God. I found myself thinking how different this is from the situation in many places where the people have far more possessions but no longer have time, or space, for God in their lives: without any formal decision, the presence of God is simply no longer noticed or acknowledged. On a bulletin board outside his Church, one pastor put this terse statement: 'If God seems far away, who moved?'

Jesuit, Tom O'Donovan, wrote that the removal of God results in two kinds of ‘atheisms’, not in the narrow, technical sense of a formal rejection of God but in the broad sense that God simply no longer plays any part in our lives.

The first type of modern atheism O'Donovan calls the "Atheism of Distraction". This describes people who are too busy to have any time for God, people whose way of life affirms that religion might be okay, even good for the kids, but we can’t spare the time to worry about things like that.

The second type O'Donovan calls the "Atheism of Materialism". This describes a group of self-satisfied people who believe they have all they need in the things they possess. When a young Danish woman was asked in a television interview, whether or not her family went to Church, she replied in words that sum up the Atheism of Materialism: "We don't go to Church. We have everything we want. We don't need God."

The people of the Congo, or South Sudan, could well say why has God deserted us? Why do we struggle to find food, water, shelter, security. Yet they do not blame God but, with their simple faith, continue to seek God. Here one notices neither the Atheism of Distraction - I don't have time for God - nor the Atheism of Materialism - I have everything I want, I don't need God. Not yet anyway! I wish prosperity for these people but they are rich already in the appreciation they have of simple things: basic food, water, a smile, a hand shake, the value they place on family and friends, and their faith in a loving God.
I enjoyed very much the past three weeks teaching English and Ethics to our new students in the registered nurse training and mid-wife programmes in Wau. The students expressed gratitude for the opportunity they have been given to become professional healers in this abused land. If our lives are focused on helping others in need, God will always be in our hearts. But if material gain and personal pleasure become more important, there is a problem. We have time for God here. Now what a great gift is that!

- Br Bill

Chinese UN troops visit CHTI

CTHI students

Exams are serious

Fr. Mario outside his church

Inside church at Mass

Learner