

Among the cured lepers of Enugu:

During my teaching stint in Islamic northern Nigeria ('77-'78), I took only one brief trip through the Christian dominated southeast. The following was an eye-opening encounter near Enugu, where I delivered a donation cheque to a Mary Knoll mission with an adjacent leper colony. The following are notes of my overnight stay at the mission where I was hosted by the unforgettable Brother Peter:

1

I write this on a slab of wood propped up by cement blocks in kerosene lamplight in the guest room of the Emene-Nike Home for the Disabled.

At 11:30 AM this morning, after the harrowing journey from Onitsha, I rolled in by taxi from the motor park. The taxi pirate, who drove to the mission near the airport northeast of the city, gouged me for 4 *niara*, almost the same as the fare from Onitsha.

Brother Peter Leonard, a rangy agile 60-year-old Mary Knoll monk, was in a ragged undershirt stringing chicken wire when I approached. As I extended my hand, he squinted grimly at my face as if to get a fix on my character. When I pulled out the CUSO letter and told him about the 1000 *naira* donation I was bringing, he broke into a yellow-toothed grin.

“O boy, O boy— that’s great!” he said excitedly in his native accent of Poughkeepsie, New York.

5 minutes after I dropped my bag in the guest hut where I invited to stay the night, Brother Peter gave me the guided tour.

Besides himself and his fellow Mary Knoll brother, Jerome, who was Igbo—Brother Peter said there were 4 other able-bodied labourers on the mission.

The property itself about 2 kilometers from the center of Enugu near the village of Emene, covers a hilly dirt-poor patch of Igboland. Its slash and burned-over laterite soil barely supports yam and pawpaw but no other cash crops.

As we walked along Brother Peter gave me a mini lecture on the properties of tropical soil. He made it clear that the best hope of the mission was not in farming the nutrient poor soil, but in the mission’s poultry operation. The plan was to double the 1,000 certified Rhode Island Red layers— and the CUSO donation would go a considerable distance towards achieving that.

The challenges of achieving self-reliance would not be so daunting, according to the brother, had the mission infrastructure itself been better conceived. As an example, he pointed to the cement structures, apparently compost pits:

“All designed by Mr. Larkin, a British aviation engineer who donated time to Catholic charities. But he had no experience in agricultural management,” said the brother. “Compost pits with no proper circulation— how’s that supposed to work?”

Then there was a water tank not sufficiently elevated for gravity flow though the pipes—not to mention the barrack-style housing.

“Was the design for inmates or for patients?” he asked with a rictus grin. “All the people here are cured of leprosy, anyway. They are just disabled people who want to live with dignity.”

Throughout the tour, we stopped to greet the residents: the less severely afflicted were only fingerless or toeless—the more severe cases were missing hands, feet, ears and noses. All laughed and smiled their greetings with unparalleled human warmth. Brother Peter watched approvingly as I extended my hand to shake the rough hands or stumped forearms of all.

Most memorable was blind old Leon, of the minority Efik tribe. When we stopped before him, he was on his knees, holding a Nido milk can between his forearms, dribbling water along a row of straggling green shoots.

“These people have farming in their blood,” said Brother Peter softly, “When they have no hands to hoe with, they’ll hoe with their feet.”

As we walked on, Brother Peter informed that Leon not only lost hands and feet to leprosy but was also tortured and blinded by Hausa soldiers in the Biafra war: (“Glad you didn’t mention you teach in the north,” he said). He then stopped and nodded behind to where Leon was back to his careful watering.

“The world is completely dark to him, but he is *so* intimate with God inside himself,” said the brother.

2

Before sitting down to dinner in the humble refectory, Brother Peter teasingly chuckled in my eagerness to get to the hand basin.

“The old biblical fear of the unclean. It’s deep within us all,” he said, “but don’t worry—everyone here’s *cured*.”

We sat in the rough wooden table with Brother Jerome, a crinkly smiling Nigerian in wire-rim glasses, and were served by little Sunday, an orphan. After hastily crossing themselves, the Brothers fell to. I picked without appetite at the stockfish, pasty yams and okra greens: not so much in the squeamishness of scaly leper stumps—but in the bit of okra stuck in the teeth of the garrulous Brother Peter.

After lunch, came siesta time—but the inexhaustible Brother Peter forfeited his rest and trucked into town on business. Back at 2:45 PM, he knocked on the guest room screen door where I was napping. Still dazed, I stumbled out for our walk down to the Enugu Rehabilitation Centre construction site (Anambra State’s ‘Hopesville’ in the works). After 1½ kilometers in the hot sun and back, we went into the kitchen for a drink of water and more chatter.

Seemingly starved for conversation, he talked from late afternoon into dusk and lamplight while I sat across from him at the refectory table. He spun anecdotes coloured with details of decades of his mission-work in Bougainville, Papua New Guinea; Sri Lanka, Malaysia and Vietnam all before coming here to Eastern Nigeria, to act as supervisor of this leper colony.

He spoke of his conviction that the “word of God” succored souls even in the most grinding material poverty. He emphasized that Christianity provided immeasurably deeper hopes than the gospel of “social justice” promulgated by “godless communism”. He seemed keen to tease out my politics.

I resisted the temptation to comment that the virtues of thriftiness, perseverance and capital investment he extolled for inspiring the benighted corners of the world smacked very much of Protestantism.

“It’s a scary time,” he said, “In all life I’ve never seen a time when the church has been in such a struggle with the forces of evil and hatred.”

In a Manichean twist, he implied that the dark forces are actually in ascendancy—that on the secular political front—communism was possibly winning the propaganda war against democracy. According to Peter, if world communism does prevail, the naiveté of the western media and academia will be much to blame:

“I can hardly believe there are so many dupes in the west who romanticize Communism and shut their eyes to the 30 million victims of Stalinism,” he said with a ‘tsk’ of scorn.

As polite guest, I mostly listened and nodded. Still, when I made a passing reference to some admiration for the achievements of the Cuban revolution, I was surprised by the vociferousness with which Brother Peter lashed back. He began by scathing the universities for having corrupted the young into “incredibly naïve” views of justice in the present world order:

“I am so discouraged when I talk with young people,” he said, “most of them can’t hold a decent conversation. They ignore details and try to jump right into the half-baked theories they barely understand, anyway.”

He went on to rage against the Viet Cong. He described “living in the terror of guerrilla attacks” while serving on a South Vietnamese Mission. He said that while naïve western journalists portrayed the American foe in Vietnam as a ragtag peasant army, they were in fact an advance guard of a monstrous octopus with tentacles stretching from Peking and Moscow to Havana. He gave the example of the “diabolical sneakiness” of the north Vietnamese in designing weapons that were calibrated to fire both American and Soviet ammo. He insisted that 3 years after the communist takeover, Vietnam is “one vast concentration camp”. Yet on college campuses and in the editorials of liberal newspapers—where was the clamour for the human rights of these victims?

“Don’t expect so much as a whimper from American university students,” he said.

While I offered polite grins, Brother Peter marshaled his armory of details. With his scraps of politics and literature and military history—he was a virtual Clausewitz of facts in anti-communist rhetorical warfare.

However graciously I was treated as the bearer of the CUSO cheque, no doubt Brother Peter suspected me to be a typical product of the liberal arts propaganda factories and dupe of the pinko intellectuals with no experience of the real world. Of course, even as a lost soul, I was still deserving of God’s mercy.

Just how typical is American Brother Peter among his Mary Knoll brethren?

Even as I bristled before his right-wing politics, I was profoundly impressed by his work ethic. In the few hours of my visit, apart from his manic talk he was continuously at work. As much of the “ugly American” he seemed superficially, his astonishing selflessness was humbling. He was indeed, was a complex and intensely ethical man...

3

Before putting down the pen, and collapsing on the straw filled mattress, I cannot but pause again in gratitude for my lucky deliverance this morning.

Even as I look out from the window above this desk towards the blue landing lights of Enugu airport on the edge of the mission, even as my mind races with this afternoon’s impressions, I am haunted by the heart-stopping moments I braced for a crash of the 504 Peugeot taxi on the harrowing ride from Onitsha (recall the lorry bearing down as the crazy driver tried to pass a smoking bus on a blind hill). Those images may stay with me long after the diatribe of Brother Peter— or even the spirituality of old Leon, the cured leper— fade into the void.

Even as a non-believer, I was glad to close my eyes and whisper along with Brother Peter and Brother Jerome as they crossed themselves before lunch and murmured:
‘*Ekene dili, Chukwu* [thank you, lord]...



1978, January, Hadejia, Nigeria (From green ring-bound notebook, transcribed, 2017).