

Ebola: On our own we can do nothing

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Steve Ogunde is a Kenyan engineer working in Liberia. He is helping to install water and health facilities for the people affected by the Ebola crisis. He has done similar work in other disaster situations in Ghana,

Burundi, Sudan, Ethiopia, Syria, Turkey, Philippines in the past 25 years.

Hello Steve, what is your work in Liberia?

My real job is Wash/IPC – water sanitation, Hygiene and Infection Protection and Control. This involves the provision of water, highly chlorinated water, for disinfection and decontamination and waste management (solid, liquid) and including medical waste: safe collection, storage, transportation and disposal.

How do you manage to keep safe in these difficult situations?

Safety in the Ebola Treatment Unit (ETU) involve use of personal protection equipment (PPE) and using chlorinated water for cleaning and hand washing. The priority is to protect myself and then my

colleagues so that we can assist Ebola patients face their death gracefully, without us getting infected in the process so that we can be available to help more patients and longer.

What is your impression of the situation in Liberia?

At the moment the situation really looks hopeless, but it is not without hope for us who know God. It is not easy to be aware that the patient being admitted and taken care of may be only a day or two from death. I have witnessed a man with his wife brought by ambulance and both died four and five days later. The first to die was the wife. The man was in the unconfirmed Ebola patient Ward. He cried his heart out when he was informed of the death of his wife. I felt the emotion of a man mourning the death of the woman of his youth. He was already very weakened by the disease himself even at that time.

But it was clear to him that he would not even be able to see the burial of his loved one. He died some 12 hours later. Now the 5 children they left behind were brought to the ETU the following day. The two, three and five years old children are positive, but the elder two – 15 and 17 years old, have been declared negative and will be released to go back home. However the survival chance is slim for the younger ones who remain under surveillance at out treatment unit.

Do you think that we are going to win the battle in this epidemic situation?

With God everything is possible. However humanly speaking, the road is still long before getting a medical cure for Ebola. Still, I believe that if we step up hygiene and sanitation at the village level and with early detection of victims and their immediate isolation, this would

minimize the infection and reduce the current death rate. Much research and prayer is really needed to make a breakthrough.

How do you manage to pray and work at the same time?

I spend some 12 hours at the ETU daily, seven days a week. I manage to go for Sunday morning mass, through an arrangement I have made with my Supervisor. I try to do my daily norms, doing the afternoon prayers sometimes walking on the street or standing at a quiet corner outside the ETU. The weather here is too hot (some 45C) and highly humid. I am very exhausted in the evening and I fall easily asleep when trying to pray. So I try to do all the prayers as early as possible. In the day, while at work, I try to think of God and of the patients. This keeps me praying and asking the Lord to help his people

and give us a breakthrough for a cure.

How is your family? Do you keep in touch with them from Liberia?

My wife and I communicate daily through WhatsApp and phone. I also call my three children once a week to hear them. It is not enough but I feel lonely if I do not do that. But, most of all, I keep the family in my prayer asking the Lord to do with them what I cannot do, due to my physical absence.

How is the spirit of Opus Dei helping you in your work?

I get encouragement trying to be as Blessed Alvaro. I pray to him many times during the day. The spirit of Opus Dei gives me strength to face the reality of death, even when it means the extinction of an entire family. I come to realize that, in reality, on our own we can do

nothing unless the Lord helps us. I can see the helplessness of my medical colleagues with no solution in sight for a medical cure. I see the difference between a person who prays and one who wants to rely on his own qualification and experience alone. The strength of prayers comes more forcefully and it makes a big difference.

What do you do to bring people close to Jesus in those circumstances?

Remaining calm through prayer in the middle of the hopelessness that we face in our work to help the Ebola victims is most effective. It also helps me to solve conflicts with and among my colleagues.

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