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A Visit to the Iwollo Rural Development Health Centre

Encouraged by St. Josemaría Escrivá, many of the faithful of Opus Dei have joined with friends to promote social projects. One of this in Nigeria is the Iwollo Rural Development Health Centre, a voluntary service project set up to help solve multifarious health problems prevalent in the Iwollo village and its environs. Dr. Tony Odoh, a medical practitioner, recounts a recent visit.

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The comforting silence of the consulting room was suddenly shattered by a cry. It was a heart rending sound, causing it to miss some beats. My instinctive reaction was to run towards the direction of the cry, convinced that the worst had happened. It turned out to be the anguished wailing of a mother who watched helplessly as her daughter was racked by convulsions. For most people in a non-hospital environment, it is a sight that can cause consternation, with many people offering different opinions as to the best manner of abating the convulsions. In this instance, with the help of the nurse who was present and with the cries and prayers of the girl's parents in the background, the necessary

medications were administered and the seizure abated.

The scene recounted above is easily seen in many hospitals throughout the country. However, this particular incident occurred when I paid a visit to Iwollo Rural Development Health Centre, located in Ezeagu Local Government Area, about 45 minutes' drive from Enugu city, to lend a helping hand. I had been invited by one of the doctors who go there every week to look after the medical needs of the villagers. Not having any appointments in my hospital to contend with that morning, I happily agreed to go with him.

Opus Dei has taught me how to become a saint in my medical profession. As such I try to use daily encounters with patients and other people, both to please God as well as bring him to these people. I have come to understand that my love for

God is made a reality when I help all those around me. Most of the people who benefit from the Iwollo Health Centre cannot otherwise afford good medical care. That is why I am happy to lend a hand there whenever my job schedule allows me. Although I do not get paid for this totally voluntary service, I am convinced that I am fully compensated by the joy I help to restore in the lives of these people. Besides, it helps me to become holier, the primordial goal of my life. A good bargain, isn't it?

The Iwollo Health Centre is run by the Niger Foundation Hospital in Enugu, which itself began in August 1993 with the objective of providing reliable medical services based on Christian principles of respect for human dignity. In addition to maintaining ethical practices in the care of each sick person, the hospital provides counseling and spiritual attention to patients who freely want

it. Opus Dei takes care of the spiritual care of the patients and staff in the hospital.

Apart from offering the usual spectrum of health services to patients, the hospital also undertakes different forms of community-development efforts. The doctors working there offer free consultancy services to the residents of an Old Peoples' Home in Enugu as well as running the Iwollo Rural Health Centre, the subject of this story. The Iwollo project began last year (2003) in order to assuage the various health problems prevalent in that community and its environs.

The drive to the Health Centre was pleasant enough, what with the surrounding greenery and the freshness of the air that was pleasant change, after the oppressive heat of Enugu city. At a point in the journey we left the tarred road and took a

dirt track from which we eventually entered a yet narrower road that brought us to the clinic. I was agreeably surprised with what I was confronted with. The first thing that struck the eye was the order and cleanliness evident in all the rooms. There was a spacious waiting room, some consulting rooms, a room set apart for emergency purposes (this had the necessary materials including some oxygen cylinders which we put into use on that very day), a pharmacy stocked with drugs as well as a classroom filled with chairs that was set apart for giving talks and demonstrations to the patients. Some of these talks are on proper hygiene and management of basic health needs.

My companion explained to me that a nurse goes daily to the clinic to offer basic health care to the patients as well as ensure that those who had medications to take did so. A doctor

goes weekly to offer consultation to the patients. I also learnt that the clinic undertakes a monthly vaccination exercise which is part of the overall vaccination programme which the local government carries out. Some of the drugs that are dispensed in the clinic are given to the patients at the cost price gotten from the manufacturers, while some medicines are actually given to them free of charge, especially when they are received as donations to the hospital from pharmaceutical companies. A weekly lecture will soon be started with the focus mainly on the rural women – aspects of hygiene, breastfeeding, diet and rudimentary health education. With time, these classes will eventually focus on particular disease conditions prevalent in the area and will involve the whole community.

I spent the rest of the morning seeing patients and doing my best to

alleviate their needs. The happiness on their faces on being able to see a doctor more than paid back for any tiredness I might have felt as the morning dragged on. I have no doubt that having a clinic close to their homes made them bring their medical complaints to light earlier than they would have if they needed to traverse long distances to get medical attention. When a doctor eventually becomes resident in the clinic, the scope of work done will be greatly enlarged.

As I left the hospital for the trip back to Enugu, I saw the earlier-distraught mother with her child, now fully recovered and playing with some other children. She wore a look of utmost gratitude which is the best of rewards that a doctor can ever get while carrying out his job. She represented the thousands who were surely going to find the services of the Iwollo clinic life-saving. I simply

smiled, patted the little girl's head and got into the vehicle. The morning had been truly well spent.

By Dr. Anthony Odo

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