

"Do whatever you want"

Fr James Chápuli died on 25 September 2007 in Nigeria. He had been in Nigeria for 38 years and had acquired the Nigerian citizenship. We include a transcription of a testimony he wrote during his last stay in Spain last June.

13/11/2007

A friend of his has written in a blog, dated 24 October 2007:

He was in Granada – the city where he was born, because his home was now in Nigeria – before the Summer when I was able to see him for the last time, and I saw that he never paused for even one moment, always looking for financial aid and support for his beloved African country. In a couple of weeks he had more than 50 appointments with people, public and private institutions, and businesses..., presenting projects, reports and applications..., speaking, requesting, convincing..., and having the door closed in his face more than once. Today, in fact, the news has come through that a financial firm has agreed to donate a substantial amount of euros for a project to help a training centre for boys in a poor locality near Lagos.

The blog continues:

We tried to make him rest during those days last June and to replace his

depleted wardrobe, feed him well – for he was very thin – and see that he had a good medical check up. We thought we had seen him go back to Nigeria, as good as new, but God knows best. Although we are sorry for his sudden death and although we miss his untiring work for that immense and populated country, the truth is that he had truly deserved a rest such as only the Lord provides.

Granada in the 1950s

I got to know Opus Dei thanks to my father, who was one of the first Supernumeraries of Opus Dei in Granada, together with Eduardo Ortiz de Landázuri. But my most immediate contact was through the Students Mountaineering Club in Granada, which was started by two university students from the Students' Residence *Albaycin*.

I was then in the third year of a secondary school run by the Marist

Fathers, and I was a great friend of Manolo Ortiz de Landázuri. One day we found out that there was a club just starting out for boys of our age, which would organize excursions to the mountains.

The idea interested us and so we began to attend that boys' Club. I liked tennis and mountaineering and soon learnt how to ski quite well. One of the things which struck me during those excursions was the cheerful atmosphere that prevailed in the Land Rover which took us to Sierra Nevada. We went along the way singing in an atmosphere of great joy.

Slowly, I was discovering the spirit of Opus Dei – sanctification in the midst of the world – and I soon saw clearly that God was calling me to serve him along that way.

When I finished secondary school I moved to Madrid to study

Economics. Later I went to Barcelona and then returned to Madrid for the final year, and it was during that year that I was asked if I would like to go to Rome, a proposal I gladly accepted.

In Rome with Saint Josemaría

On completion of my studies I went to Rome, where I met Saint Josemaría, and had the great fortune of being with him on many occasions. I lived in the Roman College which was then in Villa Tevere. Those were the years of Vatican II, and John XXIII had just been elected. I remember that many Council Fathers and bishops went to Villa Tevere to talk with Saint Josemaría, who followed the proceedings of the Council with great interest and a deep love for the Church.

In two years I completed my ecclesiastic studies in Rome and then

went to the University of Navarre, Spain for my thesis in Canon Law. I lived then in a university Centre on Paulino Caballero Street, where I was also the director. Shortly after in 1966, I was ordained as a priest in Segovia, returning to the same centre in order to finish up my thesis.

That was when the apostolate of Opus Dei was just beginning in Nigeria. There were six people of Opus Dei already in the country: three priests and three laymen, and from time to time we heard news about them. One fine day I was asked if I was willing to go to that country and I remember replying, “Wherever I’m needed”.

Nigeria

I began to learn about Nigeria, considering it already as my own country. I got in contact with a group of Africans who were studying in the University of Navarre with

scholarships, and they started to tell me things about Nigeria. One of them told me that Nigerians were very keen – ‘hungry’ was the word he used – to receive formation; that there was an interest in religion, but many priests were needed.

The Regional Vicar of Opus Dei in Nigeria, Fr Joseph Gabiola, sent me a letter saying that they already had a hired house, and had already held one retreat with young men and another for university lecturers. For the next few months I followed their progress in Nigeria through the letters they sent me.

As soon as I defended my thesis, I headed for Africa, with one year’s experience as a priest. I was not able to obtain a visa for Nigeria, however, because the whole country was in a difficult situation; the Biafra War had just started, and all foreign priests had been expelled. It was meant as a

punishment for the missionaries that had stayed with the Ibos who wanted to break away.

This made me change my plans and I had to remain in Kenya waiting for a visa to get into Nigeria. I was in Kenya for a month, two months, four, five, six months, waiting. And after nearly a year, I was granted a visa and could make my way to Nigeria.

Nigeria is very different from Kenya. I found the people from Kenya calm and serene, even phlegmatic, like the Englishmen of the colonial period. As soon as I arrived in Nigeria, my attention was drawn by the joy of being alive which was everywhere, the great number of children and the love for dance prevalent among the people. I had the feeling of having landed in the midst of a colourful and dancing crowd.

I was also struck by the skin tone of the Nigerians, with its wide range of

variations: while some veered towards red, others were more like chocolate, and others again showed an olive tint. I had found it a bit difficult going through the streets because as soon as the children saw me, they would surround me and would begin to sing a typical song about those who are white. The words were:

-Oyibo pepper, oyibo pepper!

On my arrival at the rented house I was very disheartened, being my first contact with the poverty of Africa. Everything was so elementary. The front door led directly into the dining room, so that one practically ate and lived in the street. After lunch I said to Fr Joseph:

- Well, here I am: What do I have to do?

I expected to be given some pastoral work to do, or that I would be asked

to look after some specific people, but he looked at me in a rather bemused manner and said:

What do you have to do? Do whatever you want!

I realised I had to do everything because everything had still to be done.

Our first task was to survive and keep financially afloat. Alberto Alós, one of the laymen, was teaching electronic physics at the university. Fr Joseph, the Counsellor, apart from his priestly work, was teaching mathematics. The other priest also had a teaching job.

Yes, everything had still to be done. The whole country was waiting for us. I remembered Saint Josemaría, who in order to reach every soul had started with university students, and I set off for the university – walking, of course, for we had no other means

of getting there – at about five o'clock in the afternoon, when the heat was abating a bit.

My white cassock did not pass unnoticed at the university, and I began to know a number of students and make friends with some of them. I saw some who were playing football, and I went to see them. Ondó was one of them. He was a Catholic, and we soon became friends. He invited me to see the residence where he lived. Soon after, I became the chaplain of the residence, for the students came to ask me for advice and to be heard in confession. Among other means of formation I started giving a meditation once a week at the centre.

With my priest friends

Within the framework of that “Do whatever you want” of taking the initiative in the apostolate, I began to meet students from the different

colleges of the campus. Weekly classes of Christian Doctrine were started, and I was asked to say Mass on Sundays for them. Catholic students were in the minority, but they helped a lot and showed a great desire for learning.

I also visited the Diocesan Seminary, where I soon made friends among the teachers and the seminarians. In particular, some young priests became good friends of mine. One of them was Fr. Alaba Job, who was my age and had a great sense of humour. Felix – that was his Christian name – had just come back from Rome, where he had been studying for some time, and we often recalled our time spent in Italy.

In that simple way we started the work of Opus Dei in Nigeria, overcoming, as always happens at the start, many difficulties.

For instance, to begin with the landlord cheated us over the price of renting the house: my first encounter with the problem of corruption in Nigeria, a problem that is still there till today. This problem is not specific to Nigeria though because there some people here who continue to take advantage of the needs and poverty of others, be they foreigners or fellow citizens.

The country was at that time at the beginning of the commercial exploration of oil, and a certain sense of prosperity pervaded everywhere, for some citizens had become rich overnight. The streets were crammed with vehicles which created an unimaginable traffic chaos. However, many students continued living – or rather surviving on – on a 0-1-0 diet.

An 0-1-0 diet

With the 0-1-0 (or more usually 0-0-1) diet, only the hardiest could survive. It consisted in only having one meal a day as they could not afford more. The more fortunate managed the 1-0-1.

It was not that the food was dear, on the contrary it was extremely cheap; what happened was that their parents could not help them financially at all, not even in that, in spite of the fact that matriculation fees were minimal and their stay at the residence was free. But the great majority had to balance their studies and their survival on a knife edge.

This was a reflection of the state of affairs in most parts of the country. Nigeria is badly in need of development; the majority of the population continues to live below the threshold of poverty, and there is a great amount of illiteracy. Some only manage to speak a primitive

type of English to get by. The majority live on less than one dollar a day... in the case that they have work and can earn some money.

The paradox is that Nigeria is a rich country, with important oil reserves. But that money ends up mainly with the multinationals and government agencies because a great part of the sale of crude oil goes to the government. That is the way that the national budget is financed, by law.

This gives rise to grave social disorders. The very few who profit from the multinationals lead an opulent lifestyle, own large houses and enjoy a high standard of living. A few more – very few – make a living from being employed by the multinationals, or work in banks. As for the rest of the population, how do they manage, in a country without any industry and underdeveloped? They do their best to survive in a

wretched and famished condition which is humanly terrible. It is not surprising that this spiral of poverty may lead at times to corruption and crime.

It was this that moved us, on the occasion of St Josemaría's centenary, to begin a new technical school, the Institute for Industrial Technology (IIT), in order to provide professional formation for the underprivileged to be self-sustaining through their newly acquired skills.

Many moving stories have come from the IIT in these past five years; the following is just one of such. One of the graduates of the IIT had earned his living as a newspaper vendor on the streets. It was in the course of this job that he saw an announcement about the new school in one of the newspapers he was selling, and so went to find out about it. Now, with the skills he has

acquired, he works as a technician in a private university in Lagos, and is able to ensure that his family no longer goes hungry.

That is why we need many generous donors who can provide for the scholarships required for boys like this one, so that they can break the spiral of poverty in which they find themselves, and can obtain a worthy job. It is not enough to provide them with money from time to time: they need to be helped to aspire to a worthy life, providing them with the means they require to help themselves, so that they can set up their own small business and support their families with dignity.

The IIT (Institute for Industrial Technology) is a seedbed of human and Christian virtues, such as honesty and social justice. Unfortunately the country had consistently been listed among the

top most corrupt countries of the world, and this is not good. Although the country's leaders have been passing laws to remedy this situation, it is still far from being better.

A group of members of Opus Dei set up a business school in Nigeria (the Lagos Business School) which aims to form managers and directors so that, individually and collectively they may spread the values of honesty, responsibility and justice in the world of business. It is important that the country should have well known persons that can be a point of reference in business. I have had the fortune of meeting some of them when they were growing up. Now there are many men and women who after many years of work and effort now occupy responsible positions in the country. The same positive improvement is being observed in other areas of human endeavour.

My friend Fr. Felix Alaba Job was made the Bishop of Ibadan three years after our first meeting. He is now the Archbishop of Ibadan, and has just been elected President of the Episcopal Conference of Nigeria.

Fr James Muñoz Chápuli

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