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Ebola: "On our own we can do nothing"

Steve Ogunde is a Kenyan engineer now in Liberia helping to fight the Ebola crisis. He says "the spirit of Opus Dei gives me strength to face the reality of death."

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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, and the 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) 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) involves use of personal protection equipment (PPE) and using chlorinated water for cleaning and hand washing. The priority is to protect myself and my colleagues so that we can assist Ebola patients,

without getting infected in the process.

What is your impression of the situation in Liberia?

At the moment the situation really looks hopeless, but it is not without hope for someone who trusts in 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 saw 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. 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 our treatment unit.

Do you think we are going to win the battle against this epidemic?

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 can minimize the infection and reduce the current death rate. Much

research and prayer is 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 prayer sometimes walking on the street or standing at a quiet corner outside the ETU. The weather here is extremely hot (sometimes 45C) and humid. I am very exhausted in the evening and I fall asleep easily when trying to pray. So I try to do all my 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 talk with 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 for 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 by trying to follow Blessed Alvaro's example. 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 prayer 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.