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"Do what you Want"

Fr James Muñoz Chápuli died on 24 September 2007 in Nigeria. We include a transcription of a testimony he wrote during his last stay in Spain.

08/11/2007

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 he never ceased one moment, always looking for financial aid and support for his beloved African country. In a couple of weeks he carried out 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 project to help a training centre for boys in an area that is being drained near Lagos.

The blog continues:

We tried to make him rest those days last June and 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, 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 1950's***

I came across 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 Colegio Mayor Albaycin.

I was then studying third year of Baccalaureate at the 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, run by boys like

us, which organised mountain excursions.

We were interested in the idea and we started to go to the Club. I liked tennis and mountaineering I soon learnt how to ski quite well. I was attracted by the cheerful atmosphere that prevailed in the Land Rover which took us to Sierra Nevada, singing merrily along the way.

I discovered the spirit of Opus Dei - to seek holiness 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 school I transferred my studies to Madrid to do Economics. I then went to Barcelona and back to Madrid for the final year. It was that year that I was asked if I would like to go to Rome, and I gladly accepted.

In Rome with Saint Josemaría

When I finished my studies I went to Rome, where I met Saint Josemaría, and had the great fortune of being many times with him. 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 Fathers of the Council and bishops went to talk with Saint Josemaría, who followed the proceedings of the Council with great interest and a deep love for the Church.

After two years, having finished my ecclesiastical studies in Rome, I went to the University of Navarre to write my Canon Law thesis. I lived in a University Centre in Paulino Caballero Street, where I was the director. Soon after, in 1966 I was ordained as a priest in Segovia, and returned to the same centre as a priest to finish my thesis.

At that time the apostolate of the Work was just beginning in Nigeria. There were six people of Opus Dei, 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.

- Wherever I'm needed, I said.

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 Counsellor of Opus Dei in Nigeria, Fr Joseph Gabiola, sent me a

letter saying that they already had a hired house, and had already held a retreat with young men and university lecturers. For the next few months I followed their progress in Nigeria by 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 state of upheaval; 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 their independence.

My plans had to be changed, and I had to stay first in Kenya waiting for a visa to get into Nigeria. I was in Kenya for a month, two, four, five, six, waiting. And after nearly a year, I was granted a visa and could make my way to Nigeria.

Nigeria is very different to 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, I was struck by the streets teeming with people, and amazed by the cheerfulness and vitality to be seen everywhere, the great number of children, and the keenness all showed for dancing. I had the feeling of having landed in the midst of a colourful and swaying multitude.

In order to walk along the street I had difficulty in making my way through the crowd. As soon as the children saw me, they would surround me and would begin to sing a typical song meant for those who are white. The words sounded a bit like:

- Oibo, oibo, peck, peck!

It is an amusing chant that comes to mean something like: Look at him,

look at him, he has no colour in his face. What has happened to him? His skin is red, the colour of pepper, and has hairs on his hands...

When I arrived at the house they had rented I was very disheartened. It was 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 rather amused and said:

- What do you have to do? Do what 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 I soon got to know him. 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

Among other things I did along the lines of "do what you want", was 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 Job Alaba, 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, they cheated us with the price of the rent. It was my first encounter with the problem of corruption in Nigeria, a problem that is still there. Unfortunately there are still some people who continue to take advantage of the needs and poverty

of others, be they foreigners or fellow citizens.

At that time they were beginning oil exploitation, and one could feel a certain air of prosperity, for some 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 - an 0-1-0 diet.

An 0-1-0 diet

With the 0-1-0 (or more usually 0-0-1) diet, only the hardest could survive. It consisted in only having one meal a day. 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 of the country. Nigeria is badly in need of development; the majority of the population continues to be below the threshold of poverty, and there is a large sector 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 with the multinationals, for 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 promote a technical school, I.T.I., to provide professional formation for many of those who have nothing.

The following story is one among many. One of those who has studied

at the I.T.I. was someone who earned his living as a paper boy, yelling out in the streets. One day he saw an announcement of the School, and went to find out about it. Now, with the skills he has acquired, he works as a technician at a university, 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 caught, 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 I.M.I. is a seedbed of human and Christian virtues, such as honesty and social justice. As is well known, Nigeria is subject to a high level of corruption. Unfortunately it has been at the top of the world list of corrupt countries. Some laws have been passed to remedy this, but have been found insufficient.

A group of members of Opus Dei have set up a business school in Nigeria to form managers and directors so that 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 figures that can provide a point of reference in that field. I have met some of them when they were young. They are men and women who after many years of work effort now occupy responsible positions in the country.

The same applies in other areas different from that of commerce. My friend Job, three years after we met, while he was still young, was made the Bishop of Ibadan. I remember he asked me to preach to him the retreat prior to his ordination. Now he is the Archbishop of Ibadan, and has just been appointed President of the Episcopal Conference.

Fr James Muñoz Chápuli

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