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Lessons from Congo

Nuria Mata has lived through two wars and once found herself looking down the gun barrel of a child soldier. Now, after 20 years in Congo, she chairs the foundation “Solidarity for Professionals” in Spain.

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How did “Solidarity for Professionals” start?

In a rather fortuitous way, I'd say. I was at the hairdresser's when the

girl who attended to me said that she had just come from a meeting of professionals. Later on, in a cafe, a waitress was saying that she had been on a training course... If those professionals were concerned about their training and their professionalism, I wondered: why not tie it up with something related to social solidarity? This idea started the foundation and fortunately, I was with a group of people who were very motivated. They had professional experience and knew what was important and what was not, and they had passed that stage of life which sought success at all cost. We started with a series of lectures, and then came the training for social work and publications.

Why this concern for social solidarity?

I had returned from Congo where I had left many people whom I love a

lot: close friends, who lived in squalid conditions... Wonderful people, educated, intelligent, good-hearted... People who have known hunger and who are very generous. Sometimes they came to me with a mango, because they wanted to assist our work. “Thank you – I told them - but you had better give it to your children,” because I knew the conditions in which they lived.

I came back to Spain in 2001 and found myself in a very self-absorbed society in which comfort and consumerism ruled the day, and where older folks were sometimes pushed into a corner. In Africa they would have been a treasure, the moral authority of the family. I thought I should do something, and tell them what I had seen in Congo.

What is the key to “Solidarity for Professionals”?

Perhaps it lies in having to learn together and to be a team. At first I was the one that pushed the initiative, now all decisions are taken by the Board, so that each can contribute something: the journalist, the secretary, the doctor...

Recently there was a mother with two young children who told me, "I'd like to lend a hand," and she has already been given a task to help with. We have employed only one person formally, all the others collaborate on a voluntary basis, happy to contribute what they can.

How has it been received by the other institutions?

Very well. Besides, I think Navarre still retains a strong sense of solidarity and professionalism. I see that they like the idea.

If you had to choose between Africa and Spain?

Now, Spain. I take each day as it comes and that is where I am now. I was 28 years old when the Prelate of Opus Dei asked if I wanted to practice my profession and begin the apostolic work in Congo. I said yes, and went to Africa full of dreams. The beginnings were very hard though, the culture shock was absolute. After a year there I told myself, "Either love them and be one more, or leave." And that's what I did; I became Congolese, and learned to love them such that their lives and their customs became mine.

Twenty years passed and my mother fell seriously ill with cancer. That's when I knew that, for a number of reasons, it was time to return. The current prelate, Bishop Javier Echevarría, told me that my experience could be very useful in Spain. And that's what I try to do.

Was it difficult to return?

At first, yes. Shortly after I returned, I went to the supermarket for some vegetables. Seeing all that abundance, those offers of three for the price of one... I felt like I needed air and I had to go outside to get a grip on myself. It's strange, considering that I have had to face so many things...

The wealth is very unequally distributed, and we have to convey a message of solidarity and moderation, to learn how to use only what you need and to make good use of what is left over without wasting. The other day I read something about space travel as a tourist. I cannot understand it; one thing is science and research, but it's quite another thing to spend so much money for fun, when there are still so many people who lack even the most basic things.

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