

Reflections on Trip to Uganda
A Letter to the USF Community
June 8, 2009

Dear Colleagues,

I am recently returned from a week in Uganda with USF students from the Erasmus Living Learning Community. These students studied human trafficking throughout the year. Uganda was selected because, until very recently, it was the site of a particularly vicious insurgency with severe human rights abuses committed by all parties to the conflict. The abduction of children and their subsequent forced service with armed groups was common and widespread throughout Northern Uganda during the war years. The phenomenon of "child soldiers" included boys as young as ten years old constrained to bear arms and even commit atrocities against family members, and girls forced to serve as sexual partners to combatants. This particularly brutal form of forced servitude or slavery is what drew our students to Uganda and attracted the attention of the "Not for Sale" campaign to end human slavery in all its forms.

Uganda is about three years into a negotiated peace and is just now beginning to pick up the broken pieces left by violence and armed conflict. The refugee camps that were set up to protect the rural populations from abduction and attack are emptying out. After twenty years of confinement, people are returning to their homesteads and starting to farm the land they were forced to abandon. We visited such a camp and found the conditions appalling and the people quite dispirited and after two decades of total dependency not well prepared to take up their lives again. The rebuilding is only just beginning and our challenge was to look at reality through their eyes, rather than to look at them and their situation through ours; and to listen to their story rather than tell ours. To do so requires discipline, patience and empathy, qualities with which I am not overly endowed, but these experiences remain valuable exercises in acquiring a global perspective on the world we are responsible for and which are educating our students to refashion into a more humane and just reality.

My memories of Uganda are shaped by a collage of vivid images that remain with me: a listless infant without energy to brush away the numerous flies crawling across his face; my conversation with an "uneducated" Rwandan who spoke ten languages, including French and grammatically perfect if heavily accented English; a human rights worker in Gulu whose commitment was undaunted by a tragically flawed justice system and a total lack of resources; a twenty-four year old African who proudly showed me the four room house he had just built brick by hand-shaped-and-fired brick for his mother on their ancestral lands; a packed Pentecost mass where the overflow congregation's singing in polyphony accompanied by instruments never before seen by me witnessed to the depth of their faith and vitality of Christianity in Africa; two small kids "playing" with wet garbage in the public market; bumping bus rides over "roads" that were only a series of linked potholes; the ubiquitously lush, green countryside punctuated by infrequent roadside markets; lively dinner conversation with the leader of the nascent opposition

party who joked about his Ph.D. in entomology being good preparation for Ugandan politics; the leader of an ecumenical - Muslim, Jew, Christian - fair trade coffee co-op in Mbale tracing its four year growth to include 2,000 families and increased profits that are reinvested in the community; a hospitality training program out in the bush for a dozen now-grown abducted children by a victim of human trafficking herself. These images bespeak energy and resourcefulness latent in the people, absence of basic infrastructure, daunting challenges facing Uganda and immense untapped human potential that will never be unleashed for lack of education and opportunity, which we may take for granted.

I left Africa with many questions and no answers: questions about politics when the government's vision is limited to retaining power and amassing wealth; about the army's influence on the life of the nation; about long term plans for providing minimal education and health care; about creating one nation in a context marked by centuries of rich and varying tribal traditions; about the responsibilities of women for the future of Africa; about the economy where unemployment runs over 50%. The list could go on, but the overarching questions are ones that situations of universal poverty and human deprivation inevitably evoke. These questions were posed decades ago by Fr. Ignacio Ellacuria, one of the martyred Jesuits of El Salvador: Do the desperately poor in developing countries live the way they do because we live the way we do? Is there a causal relationship between the ease, comfort and relative luxury that marks our lives and the misery that characterizes theirs? I hope that you share my pride and passion for a University that does not flinch from asking these questions and will "follow the evidence to its conclusion" in answering them with integrity, rigor and compassion [Mission, Vision, Values Statement].

Sincerely,

Stephen A. Privett, SJ
President