



ENCOUNTER

Catholic laity on mission – everywhere

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Welcome to Encounter!

Who is called to mission? Sometimes the Holy Spirit prompts us to leave home and serve overseas. Sometimes we are prompted to serve the homeless in our neighborhood. Or just hold a people – the immigrants on the southern border – in our hearts, our prayers, our charity. Sometimes the Holy Spirit lights a fire within us. We feel recommissioned. We are disciples. We are called to make disciples among ALL people and to share the love of Christ with everyone. All of us are called to mission – lay, religious, and ordained. We are called to mission in our neighborhoods, across our country, even around the world. We are young and old, homemakers and business leaders, students and professionals. In the words of Pope Francis, “I am a mission.” Hear the whisper of the Holy Spirit in Gabe’s story of mission. Hear the call to action for the Extraordinary Missionary Month. Share with others what moves you.

Taken by the Vow to Serve

By: Julie Bourbon

“The Holy Spirit is a jolly joker,” said Gabe Hurrish with a laugh. “He loves to make fun of you.”

Hurrish was speaking by phone from South Sudan, the world’s youngest nation, where he is working as a Maryknoll Lay Missioner for Solidarity with South Sudan. He’s taught English, math, professional studies, Christian religious education and served as an assistant to the principal at the Solidarity Teacher Training College in Yambio, his current assignment.

This isn’t Hurrish’s first time in the region. In fact, 30 years ago, he was on mission in the north of Sudan but was ill-prepared for the challenge.

“There was a crisis every day. Disasters. We were working with refugees and it was a very difficult situation,” he recalled of that time, when the country was destabilized by a military coup. “We were running healthcare. We had shortages of money, logistical problems, staffing issues, drought, then rains.”

He vowed never to return but has since found out that God often has other plans for us.



Now 61, Hurrish had what he calls “a very good Catholic upbringing” in Wisconsin, where he preferred sports to church. After college at the University of Dayton, he joined the Peace Corps and headed to Kenya.

“I kind of found myself there,” said Hurrish, who has also been on mission in Ethiopia, Indonesia, Somalia, South Africa, Italy, Hong Kong, and Peru, among other places, always carrying the Bible his mother gave him before leaving for Kenya. It is his constant companion. “I loved the people. I loved the poor. I loved the way of life.”

“A lot of people ask me, do you have to go to Africa to help the poor? No, but I feel that call, so here I am.”

He also loved his great uncle Alex, a Franciscan Third Order Regular (TOR) priest who spent more than two decades on mission in India, then another decade in Brazil.

“I remember as a child, he’d come home and tell me stories, and I was just fascinated. In those days, you only came home every 10 years or so,” Hurrish recalled. “I wanted to sell everything I owned and go be with Fr. Alex.”

When his uncle was missioned back to the States, the two developed a special closeness. Fr. Alex was nearly 99 when he died, and although Hurrish missed the funeral, he made it to his uncle’s community about two weeks later. There, the provincial and some of the other priests presented Hurrish with Fr. Alex’s missionary cross, which would traditionally have been buried with him.



“The provincial said Fr. Alex would want it to be on mission,” Hurrish said. Battered and fragile now, the cross is with him in South Sudan. “I feel my uncle’s spirit is there, praying for me. He was a very good missionary and I hope I can be like him someday.”

Sister Joan Mumaw, IHM, president and CAO of Friends in Solidarity, Inc. — a partner organization to Solidarity with South Sudan — has known Hurrish for about four years and dismisses the notion that he isn’t already a “very good missionary.”

“He’s tremendously committed and has a big heart for people” she said, listing writing and organizing as among his many talents. “He’s just a very well rounded, flexible, generous person, the kind that makes for a very good missionary. Gabe is willing to take on new challenges when there’s a need.”

Hurrish will be taking on a new challenge later this summer, when he is reassigned to Juba to serve the executive director of Solidarity as project coordinator, collecting data, writing reports, and supporting fundraising efforts for all of Solidarity’s projects in South Sudan. Those include a health program that trains midwives and nurses in Wau; a nation-wide pastoral program to train priests, sisters, brothers, lay

people, and bishops; an agricultural program to work with farmers in Riimenze; and a presence in the north in Malakal, in a camp for internally displaced persons.



When asked what he thinks makes a person a good missionary, Hurrish is thoughtful.

“I’d say the number one thing is just to put your life in the hands of God, and it’s not easy. You have to be very calm and open and at peace with yourself and with what God is asking you to do,” he said. “We North Americans especially really want to be in control, and it’s hard for us to let go. That’s what religious have done all through history, though. They’ve just listened to that little voice. And it’s not easy because you’re asked to sacrifice quite a bit.”

And how does he explain his own calling to serve in Africa?

“A lot of people ask me, do you have to go to Africa to help the poor? No, but I feel that call, so here I am,” said the man who swore he wouldn’t return. “I never took vows, but it seems the vows have taken me.”



Article by Julie Bourbon,
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