

Another Day in Paradise

International Humanitarian Workers Tell Their Stories

*Compiled and Edited by
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*for all humanitarian workers,
past, present, and future,
in celebration of their altruism,
and courage*

11 *The House of Prayer and Peace* Sudan

Theresa Baldini, M.M.

*We feel a little like Sarah and Abraham,
Living in South Sudan.
Planning a place of prayer and peace,
Where war is scarring the land.*

Our house of prayer and peace is in the village of Narus, South Sudan. Sister Madeline McHugh and I are Contemplative Maryknoll Sisters. We are here to provide respite for the people displaced by the war between the Islamic North and the mostly Christian South. In 1983, the government in Khartoum introduced Sharia-Islamic law. This triggered the war, causing horrific suffering among the people.

Our presence here is a quiet, nonviolent, and modest one. It began in January 1986 and continued until 1992, was suspended for eight years, and began again in January 2000, by which time Sister Madeline, fully recovered from a deadly form of cerebral malaria, was seventy-nine years young, and I was sixty-three.

We have a friendship with the people around us. They see us doing our own cleaning, cooking, and gardening, and they help us expand our new metal dwelling, which has replaced the mud-and-grass *tukul* (hut) we lived in when we first moved here. Recently, with the help of our neighbors, we have added a small chapel, a *choo* (toilet), a shower, and a storeroom. A school for girls meets under the trees, and there is also a clinic in the compound staffed by two Ugandan sister-nurses.

Occasionally, we hire someone to help us pull up weeds



Maryknoll Sisters Madeline McHugh (on the left) and Theresa Baldini (on the right) in front of their house in Sudan. (Maryknoll Archives)

from our grounds. One young man planted four seedling papaya trees, which should bear fruit in about five years. What is five years in a war that has been going on for nearly twenty?

Many people have suffered in Sudan; more than two million have died since the war began. The land is decimated—there is nothing to buy in Narus—and the cynical leaders in Khartoum only have interest in power and oil, so the war continues, and worsens. The money from the oil—sold to

China, Sweden, The Netherlands, Malaysia, Canada, and other countries—perpetuates the war; military equipment is bought with the proceeds. Families are uprooted, moving from one place to another to find safety where little can be found. And a guerilla group, the Ugandan Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), paid by the Khartoum government to cause trouble in South Sudan, has been ruthlessly invading villages in our Diocese of Torit. Recently, over five hundred innocent civilians were slaughtered by the LRA. The people were having a funeral rite for someone who had died that day. The soldiers surrounded the group, made some of the villagers cut up the dead body, and forced them to eat the body. Afterward, everyone else was killed and mutilated, except for two who escaped.

We built our tin-roofed chapel in the midst of this war zone. Orange blossoms cascade into the front yard, exuding fragrance and life. We know we cannot solve the problems here, but we can listen with compassion and provide comfort. We communicate in English or a modified Arabic.

An Antonov bomber flies overhead on a weekly basis, circling, looking for victims, all civilians on this sacred piece of earth. Sometimes the plane drops one bomb, sometimes eight, sometimes more than twenty. Sometimes no bombs are dropped; the plane hovers over the area, terrorizing the people, then flies off and returns five minutes later. The clinic was bombed in September 2000. For the next two years, until it was rebuilt, over one hundred patients a day were taken care of in the open air, under the trees.

Of course, there have been casualties because there are not enough bunkers. Recently, with the help of a Sudanese laborer who helped us hand-manufacture cement blocks, we built a ten-foot by four-foot underground bunker with an eight-inch thick reinforced concrete top. It is meant for about fifteen people, but more can be squeezed in.

We had one of the worst bombing experiences toward the end of 2000. On that day there were many children from the nearby school around the compound. When the bomber suddenly appeared, we filled the two bunkers near to us, but there wasn't enough space; many of us sprawled stomach down on the dirt and covered our heads. I was lying next to Sister Madeline and put my arm around her. A young girl, about eight years old, crawled between us. I could feel her heart pounding.

Other youngsters were all around us, and some were crying. We prayed a litany, which helped all of us stay calm. The bomber circled, coming lower and lower. It dropped twelve bombs just a short distance from where we were cowering.

One of the bombs did not explode. I took a picture of it sticking out of the earth, broken and sharp, desecrating the ground. On the one side is our compound, an oasis, a vision of a future, and on the other the unexploded bomb. It is like the two sides of humanity, the one positive and reinforcing, the other deadly and self-destructive.

After a bombing, there is deep silence. Not even the birds are heard, and it feels, sometimes, as though our hearts have stopped beating. Tears roll down the children's faces as they emerge from the bunker. We have nothing to offer them but our love and warm embrace, a presence that says, "We care!" Together with them, and their parents, and everyone who lives here, I am learning not to allow the fear of the bombing control me. I pray especially that the Sudanese people's suffering and their willingness to forgive the perpetrators of this war will eventually break the cycle of violence.

At night, rats scurry over the tin roofs and gnaw into our floor and walls. Like the war, they are insatiable. Although we have three bedrooms in our modest house, only one is rat-proof. I sleep there with Sister Madeline.

We are grateful for our dwelling and for the labor that has



St. Theresa Baldini greeting friends, (Marykwoil/Sean Sprague)

made our House of Prayer and Peace available for others to imbibe prayer and peace in their lives. We have no ceiling, though we are planning to construct one soon; it will make the rooms a bit cooler and also prevent the insect world from dropping on us. We do have mosquito nets, which make us feel more secure at night. The net catches scorpions, centipedes, and other insects, but we cannot be protected from the mosquitoes all the time. I, too, have had malaria more times than I can count.

And the rats. We have to live with those, too. Our cat, Angel, named after my mother, Angelina, stalks these long-tailed creatures, though we have never seen her catch one.

We set the clock for 5:30 a.m. Normally, we would arise earlier for prayer, but we need to wait past dawn until most of the rats retreat. How unrelenting they are, a model of determination. Nor do they mind the heat or suffer from debilitating fevers or complain. They teach us to meet all challenges, surviving, flourishing!

Any physical labor is done in the morning hours, when it is slightly cooler—90 degrees instead of the afternoon high of 100–120 degrees. Though I am no longer young, I try not to ask any worker to do anything I wouldn't do myself. This includes climbing up onto roofs and digging in the garden where we are trying to grow some vegetables. We have learned from the villagers to plant sukuma wiki—similar to spinach—and cow-pea leaves, both iron-rich green vegetables, as well as maize. The displaced population also receives rations distributed by Catholic Relief Services and/or the UN World Food Program. Sister Madeline and I live on lentils, peanut butter and crackers, cabbage (which can last about three weeks without refrigeration), and some fruit bought in the market town of Lokichoggio in Northern Kenya, a four-hour journey, though it is only about fifty kilometers away. This is because there are no paved roads in South Sudan;

roads are either very bad, extremely bad, or completely impassable. We travel north about once a month under a UN armed escort, and never at night. Bandits hide in the bush and attack convoys even in daylight hours. This means that we must stay in Lokichoggio overnight and return to Narus the following day.

The will to survive among the Sudanese is strong. They build their homes from scratch, they plant and harvest, they raise their children. An organization, the Sudanese Women's Voice for Peace, meets to discuss constructive ways to assist those traumatized by the war. There are many tribes in the village living peaceably, though many do not speak the same language. It reminds me of what could be—what must be—eventually.

Whenever people from outside Sudan come to visit Bishop Taban, he invites all the people in and around the compound to share a meal with his guests. Everyone contributes what little he or she has to the festivities. It is always a delightful gathering and has the feeling of family.

Life goes on, despite the war. Suffering is transformed, and we share a glimpse of love in simple moments. I do believe St. Paul's precept that when a person is weak, God is even more present.