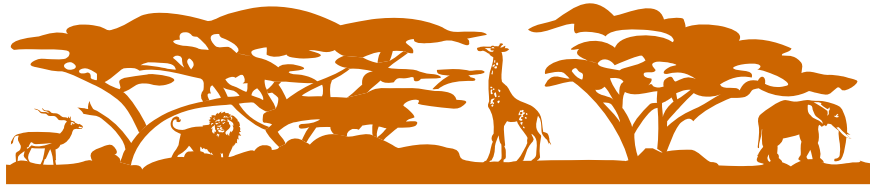


MARYKNOLL FATHERS & BROTHERS

AFRICA REGION



June 2007

Interreligious Encounter in Africa

Introduction by Doug May

When Joe Healey asked me to write something for the newsletter about interreligious and interdenominational dialog, I reacted somewhat strongly by saying I didn't believe much in it. Yet here in Cairo, Egypt, I am in a center of Islam which considers Christians as polytheists and idol worshipers *and* the center of Coptic Orthodoxy which considers Catholics as heretics and the original Protestants. While I'm not much for dialog, I am definitely in favor of "encounter" that can have an element of confrontation. Interacting with those of different religions and denominations is an everyday occasion. The big thing is to make efforts that can transcend just "you" as an individual, never forgetting that dialog/encounter cannot be an "end" in itself. The goal must be an improved interrelationship and spirit of mutual tolerance.

Egypt was the seat of an ancient and great civilization, but it is now part of the Third World ("Global South" is the expression used today). It is currently the seat of religious extremism which causes constant friction and discrimination in spite of denials to the contrary. I refer to myself as "a space invader" as I often intentionally walk into awkward and sometimes hostile situations. Teaching at an all-Muslim school for two years was a real challenge for both sides. One student said early on: "I don't like your country and I don't like your president. I'll wait and see about you." I nodded in agreement and she came back at me with: "You bow to no one but God!" We did become friends and I have found her words to be very good advice. Another one of my students was an artist who drew a picture of the forearm of "Allah" crashing thru the thick ice of Communism, Christianity and Zionism; shattering the "Hammer and Sickle," the Cross and the "Star of David" etched into the ice. Yet we totally accepted one another. I let them teach me Islam in my English classes and I would often challenge their ideas of Islamic government and society using the mistakes and lessons learned from Christian history over the centuries.

(Continued on page 2)

(Continued from page 1)

On the Orthodox front, they don't recognize our baptism, our ordination or our other sacraments. They can be "lovey-dovey" at ecumenical gathers, but we are still the "bastard children of Rome." Yet, it's important to affirm what is good while challenging what is not so good. The only way to do this is to cultivate relationships that allow one to be self confident enough to enter into situations which can go either way. Constantly interrelating in everyday life with those who are different is where it's at – so long as one tries to transcend the immediate situation and person and encourage others to do the same. Being "politically correct" doesn't accomplish a hell of a lot.

Obviously other Maryknollers have had other experiences and perspectives. Hopefully this issue of our newsletter will offer new insights on our theme.

Interreligious Encounter, YES! Dialog, NO!

By Doug May

Theme
Article

Before joining Maryknoll in 1979, I had worked as a department manager for a hotel in the Middle East. At that time, I considered myself a "social moralist" coming out of the "Christian culture" of my parents. I had left institutional Catholicism back in 1971. Not as a "man of religion," I focused on encountering and interacting with others at a strictly human level regardless of race, sex, class, nationality or religion. To my pleasant surprise, this approach allowed me to transcend many of the usual obstructions to deep interpersonal relationships with others "different" than myself. It allowed me to enter into and appreciate their world, and for them to enter into and appreciate mine. In spite of my disavowal of being "a Christian," I was told that I was a "good Christian" by Muslim, Hindu and Asian Christian guests and employees because of my respect for them and my appreciation of their religious beliefs. This experience played a major role in my returning to Christianity, Catholicism and my priestly vocation eventually lived out as a Maryknoll Missionary in the Middle East (Egypt).



Almost a decade later I returned to the Middle East (Egypt) as an American, Christian, Catholic, Latin-rite priest. As such, I was seen at first by many Arabs as an "enemy," by many Muslims as an "infidel," by many Coptic Orthodox as a "heretic," and by many Eastern Catholics as an arrogant "Latin." For two years I found myself teaching at the al-Falouja Nursing School in Cairo run by the Palestine Red Crescent Society. Of the roughly 250 students and staff, I was one of only three Christians there. Without the approval of the P.R.C.S. Director, Dr. Fathy Arafat (Yassar's brother), I would never have gotten the job or been accepted by the other staff and students. Dr. Fathy was a firm believer that a future Palestinian state should be a "secular" state avowing religious tolerance as a fundamental principle where Muslims, Christians and even Jews could live and work together in peace. At one gathering at the school, Dr. Fathy stated: "I don't care if you want to begin your day in the name of God the most merciful and compassionate or in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. If you want to fast, then fast and if you want to wear the veil, then wear it. If not, you're free. We will live in a tolerant society where no one group will dictate how another group will live or practice its faith."

After several years of trying to follow the "party line" of Maryknoll's Middle East Unit in Egypt, this experience reawakened my old belief that mutual awareness, understanding, appreciation and tolerance gained through interpersonal relationships were the objectives of interreligious encounter. What many referred to as "dialog" was for me nothing more than "game playing" and a futile exercise of "blowing air into the wind." One religious group should respect, but NOT imitate or follow the life style and religious practices of another either by coercion or by choice.

(Continued on page 3)

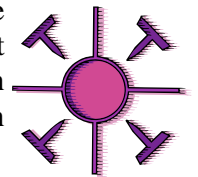
(Continued from page 2)

As my self-confidence and relationships at the school increased, I became “bolder” at being who I was as a Christian “island” in this Muslim “ocean.” For example, during the holy month of Ramadan when Muslims are expected to abstain from eating, drinking and smoking from dawn until dusk, I would not eat, drink or smoke in front of my Muslim students. HOWEVER, I would always have a huge wad of chewing gum in my mouth which I would never do at any other time during the year. My students would say, “Mr. Douglas, aren’t you fasting?” I would say, “No.” Then they would respond by saying, “But we’re in the holy month of Ramadan. We’re supposed to fast.” Then I would say, “YOU’RE supposed to fast. I’m CHRISTIAN.” Then they would say, “Oh yeah, that’s right!” Often, we would discuss the practical aspects of their Islamic culture and Palestinian history while I would talk about my Christian culture and U.S. history.

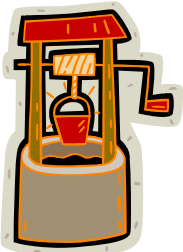
During my training as an E.S.L. teacher, I had always been told never to discuss sex, politics and religion (not to mention chewing gum) while teaching, and yet breaking all these rules was the “key” to my encounters and my success. At the Cairo Maryknoll House, we used to run around hiding the beer and the whiskey if a Muslim came to the house. Eventually I made a point of putting both out along with soft drinks and tea. If a Muslim friend came over I would say, “What would you like to drink? You are free here.” One time my friend Walid came over. He had been a very tolerant young man who had become somewhat extreme. He said, “Douglas, I wish you wouldn’t drink beer in front of me.” My response was that I wouldn’t do so in his house as it was a Muslim house. Then I said, sipping my beer, “Walid, this is my house so you are free to drink or not to drink, to stay or to leave.” He chose to leave, but many other Muslim friends did not.



“Ruh at-Tasaamuh” is Arabic for “Spirit of Tolerance.” The same methods and goals apply to interdenominational encounter. Father Mounir Qasiis, a former rector of the Coptic Catholic Seminary in Cairo, invited me to live and work at the seminary. In the spring of 1985, he said, “Douglas, I invited you here as a seminarian and want you to return as a priest because you are different. Our formation and education program here needs this.” I have never forgotten this. Also, generally most Catholic clergy are not accepted or respected by most of Coptic Orthodox clergy and many of the laity. Yet, Abuna (Father) Douglas, the “crazy American priest,” can generally interact with both freely. Once again, I meet them at the human level and refuse to “buy into” all the “game playing.” I don’t follow the Coptic fasts any more than I follow the Muslim ones while respecting our common right to be different. One of my Orthodox friend’s father said to me last year, “The only reason why I allowed my son to marry a Catholic girl in the Coptic Catholic Church is because of you.”



This year I was asked to visit an Orthodox relative who had just lost his son. I sat with the family, discussed death and prayed with them. After that I walked over to the Orthodox Church with another relative and spent an hour with the Orthodox priest who was sitting with some of the youth of the parish. We talked, drank tea and then I went to Bassam’s tomb where we prayed again. Only the day before I had concelebrated the first mass with two of my former Coptic-rite seminarians in their village where I had done part of my O.T.P. back in 1984. Back then and as now, I insisted on being “Douglas” and refused to get sucked into “playing by the rules.” Now, 23 years later, I am still known and accepted as someone who just walks up to people and sits down regardless of who they are or what their religious pedigree is.



Where does such a “politically incorrect” and “unorthodox” model come from? For me it is based on the Gospel stories of Jesus with “The Samaritan Woman at the Well,” “Zacchaeus” and others. These offer prime examples for this sort of “blind abandon” and freedom. The Good News translates into the “Gospel of Encounter” where Jesus consciously ignores the boundaries and limits that could have restricted his interpersonal encounters. He refused to play the game according to the rules set up by the “men of religion” of his time. In doing this, he transcended all these “human-made” impediments and entered the diverse world of the human spirit.

Such transcendental freedom allows us to have interpersonal encounters between people who are “different.” The world will never be free, just, and at peace if we pretend or try to be someone we’re not. Honest encounter, based on mutual awareness, understanding, appreciation and respect is the way to achieving the goal of mutual acceptance and tolerance. Notice I did not say AGREEMENT. We can still encounter each other as human beings, called by a common God to live out our faith perspectives in a way that allows for differences, yet fosters joint efforts to make the world a better place. This is my experience. This is my belief. This is my life!

Gathering of Society Members 60 Years Old and Younger

Naivasha, Kenya – 17-20 January, 2007

By Mike Snyder

Fourteen Society members of the Africa Region aged 60 years old and younger met to discuss the future of the Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers, especially in Africa in Naivasha, Kenya from 17-20 January, 2007. As the main agenda for this gathering this group initiated a preliminary discussion of the questions raised by the Maryknoll Extended Leadership Board during its 2006 meeting. I will summarize here below the points raised during these discussions. However, let me begin by stating that the most important aspect of this meeting was the touchdown session and personal reflections shared by each member of the group as he looked at the Maryknoll Society in Africa today and described his hopes for its future. Having been away from Africa for 10 years and having just returned to the Region, I was grateful for the exchange shared during these few days during sessions and at socials, and feel the experience far exceeds in value the documentation produced by the group.



These three days together were highlighted by a realistic and sober point of view regarding our present status:

The Maryknoll Society members of the Africa Region aged 60 and under are a pool of 15 to 17 men committed for life to work and mission on the African continent. Of these we can expect that 10 to 12 will be engaged in active ministry in the Region at any particular time throughout the next eight years (until the 13th General Chapter in 2014) while others will intermittently contribute to mission through Society assignments at home. As a group we are convinced that it is essential that Maryknoll increase its missionary activity on this continent. In these following paragraphs allow us to explain.

As individuals we are in Africa because “this is where our joy and passion lies.” We have found a mutual enrichment and empowerment through walking with these young local churches as they grow and mature. We share in the richness and diversity of their cultures. We accompany the poor who remain steadfast in hope. We hold the hands of the sick who we find seldom lose faith. We reach out to the marginalized who long for justice. We celebrate with the youth who, in the midst of seemingly overwhelming challenges, remain filled with hope and energy. We share the dreams of the African people for a better future! And today, as the African Churches themselves increasingly engage in mission, we believe it is our duty to remain with them and accompany them as they exercise this baptismal charism.

As Maryknollers, we identify with “people on the edge.” Following the example of Jesus we go to “the edge” seeking solidarity with the outcasts and lowly in society. In so doing, we believe that the borders of the Kingdom of God are extended. While we work together with people to eliminate the causes of poverty and injustice, we do not stand apart from them. Rather we choose to share in their suffering believing that our witness in faith helps contextualize the suffering of the innocents within the Paschal Mystery of Jesus Christ. And in so doing we are taken up in the very Mystery itself as we witness new faces of the Paschal Mystery alive in the faces of the innocent sufferers of Africa.

Personally, I was overtaken by some of the expressions of emotion as members of our group related experiences among the people of this continent.

To much of the developed world Africa remains the forgotten and dark continent. It has been left behind while global markets and technological advancements enrich the peoples of the other continents. As the historic center of racism and slavery, Africans carry in their very spirits a stigma that is most difficult to shed. Yet they strive to do so, and in so doing offer the world lessons in interreligious dialogue and interracial coexistence. These realities magnify the importance of Maryknoll’s presence in Africa. Our presence enriches the entire Society’s global vision and participation in the Mission of the Church.

We were convinced of the importance of the African experience for Maryknoll in general. How prophetic that our early leadership agreed to the Vatican’s request that we expand to the African continent after World War II. The Society has been, and continues to be, affected and inspired by the African spirit as portrayed through our missionaries and the varied service positions assumed by them at Society level.

(Continued from page 5)

As we looked to the future we determined:

A successful OTP Africa program requires commitment on the part of some Regional members to particular sites and to the functional roles involved (i.e. regular PTR sessions are an essential component). While it may be ideal to have more than one candidate placed with the Region on OTP, more often just one will be sent at any one time. The quality of our community response to the OTP candidate is essential to his growth as a missionary in Maryknoll. Senior members, with their wealth of experience and wisdom, can be an invaluable resource. The key role is one of mentoring provided by the pastoral supervisor. He provides the day to day accompaniment. As such, pastoral supervisors should be assured of training that will assist them in such an important role.



The newest addition to the Society's missionary activity in Africa is that of short term volunteers. Men and women of all ages from the U.S.A. request to work with Maryknoll in mission. We welcome short term volunteers to join us in Africa and recognize our responsibility as hosts in accompanying them during the varied lengths of time spent with us. Some come for just a few weeks while others have remained with us for a full year. Given that they are not trained in language or culture, we are challenged to devote the time and energy necessary to enable them to make the best of this experience in mission.

We also reflected upon the personal challenges that face us as a small group of missionaries spread across the African continent:

Looking at the future with 12 to 15 missionaries here in Africa, we are challenged to provide the care and support that will give us life and sustain us in mission. We will need to take on the responsibility of support for each other. We believe it is important that we maintain a physical place that we can call home, namely our Center in Nairobi. We will also need to nourish support and care from the local communities and churches where we live and work. Finally, we know that the primary sustaining relationship that will bring us happiness, success, and fulfillment is each individual's relationship with Christ himself. It is essential that we cultivate a deep intimacy with Jesus, the one who compels us to be in mission here in Africa.

It is so important to strengthen the personal friendships among Maryknollers; men with whom we can be open and candid, confident that they will listen and respond with honesty and concern. Given that we may be separated by great distances sustaining such relationships will take energy and time.

Distinctive to our identity has always been a unique identity with the U.S.A. Catholic Church:

The Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers has been a success story in the United States. We have been sharing the foreign missionary vocation experience with our sending church for nearly 100 years. The results have been such that today there are more U.S.A. Catholics serving in mission overseas than ever before. However, most of the U.S.A. Catholic missionaries today are sponsored through groups other than Maryknoll.



While many are serving through the cooperation of groups like Maryknoll, the Jesuits, Franciscans, etc., many U.S.A. Catholic dioceses, parishes, schools and other Catholic groups have "twinned" with overseas peers directly. In fact, while we remain an inspiration and provide expertise in the field of foreign mission, today Maryknoll facilitates a small fraction of U.S.A. Catholic mission overseas.

Despite the decreased visibility, Maryknoll remains an element in Christ's inspiration for Catholics in the U.S.A. to serve in mission overseas. Recognizing the increasing numbers of U.S.A Catholics serving in mission we are challenged to increase the avenues by which U.S.A. Catholics can join with us through offering them short term opportunities.

As we look to the future, Maryknoll will continue to humbly ask the Catholics in our homeland to offer prayers, financial support, and the vocations necessary for a continued response to missionary challenges in the 21st century. We will undoubtedly depend on the increased services of lay employees and utilize developing internet technology to reach U.S.A. Catholics. As an additional asset returned short term volunteers and Maryknoll Affiliates can also serve us in this pursuit. The challenge may be to harness their enthusiasm and interest in mission in a way that will further engage U.S.A. Catholics in Maryknoll's missionary enterprise.

While these few quotations reflect some of the flavor of discussion during these few days together, they were never meant to be presented to the Society at large as position papers. We recognized that our age group has never shared discussions together at this level and we were grateful for this opportunity. We have made a commitment to continue discussion during the next Africa Regional Assembly to be held in January, 2008. In the meantime, we welcome feedback from the full membership of the Africa Region and other interested Society Members. The full texts for papers produced at this meeting are available on request from the Regional Superior of the Maryknoll Society Africa Region.

“Teacher, Where Do You Live? Come, And See!” (John 1:38-39)

By Bob Jalbert

From 20 January to 3 February 2007 I had the privilege of accompanying Maryknoll Society benefactors Rosemary Chang and Ted Buttner (San Francisco area); Katie Hon and Brandy Damon (San Francisco area); Peter and Pam McBride (Franklin Lakes, NJ); and Society Major Gift Officer Ed Stewart (Gift Planning – Maryknoll, NY) to Kenya and Tanzania for a “mission exposure” experience. During those two weeks we visited many Maryknollers and eight Society projects in Kenya and seven Society projects in Tanzania. We also spent time rejoicing in God’s creation at the Ngorongoro Crater and in the Serengeti National Park.



As we prepared to return to the USA, and in reflecting upon all that we had done and seen in our short time, one participant said, “I had the feeling often of being overwhelmed; and too much so at times.”

Another shared that during all of our visits in general, “It was very inspiring to meet the local people and staff who work with the Maryknollers here.” Another participant summed up the challenge facing us all upon returning to the USA, “How do I share in-depth these experiences with my friends back home?”

So often in my Mission Education and Promotion ministry these days whether on a church date or at a school visit, people will ask me what daily life is like in Kenya and Tanzania. In response to the question, “Where do you live and what’s your ministry like in East Africa?” I was privileged to be able to accompany our group in their acceptance of the Society’s invitation, “Come, and see and experience for yourselves!.” On behalf of each member of our group, I want to express our sincere thanks to the members of the Africa Region in Kenya and Tanzania and to all of their local collaborators who welcomed us so warmly and who shared with us so openly and generously their service to God’s people. It is our hope in the Mission Education and Promotion Department to return again to East Africa on a regular basis with other small groups of the Society’s benefactors in response to the Region’s open invitation to “Come, and see!”

RON RAK'S FAVORITE EXPRESSION: “NOT TO WORRY”

By Joe Healey

One of Maryknoll Brother Ron Rak's favorite expressions was “not to worry.” If you went to him with a problem or difficulty he would often say “not to worry” and most likely come up with a solution. In 1974 I decided to participate in the 40 kilometer “National Freedom from Hunger Walk” in Nairobi, Kenya to raise money for charity. Those were my “youthful days,” and after a few weeks of exercise and practice walking I was ready. Ron helped me to get sponsors from among the Maryknollers who lived in Nairobi. If a person sponsored me for \$1 a kilometer, then if I finished the walk the person would contribute \$40. I succeeded in getting a whole sheet full of sponsors.

I “barely” finished the 40 kilometer walk with plenty of aching muscles and big blisters on my feet as proof. The next day I limped into Ron’s office and asked him how I could collect the money from the Maryknollers who lived in different parts of Nairobi. Ron said “not to worry” and took the sign-up sheet. “For anyone who signed this sheet,” he said, “I will automatically debit his Personal Account and give you all the money tomorrow.” And so he did. Of the thousands of walkers that year with Ron's help I ended up as the person who raised the fourth highest amount of money for charity.



OBTAINING ECOSOC STATUS FOR MARYKNOLL AT THE U.N.

By John McAuley

"Now you know the rest of the story" (Paul Harvey).

In the late 1990s the Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers and the Maryknoll Sisters of St. Dominic obtained consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). Obtaining consultative status with ECOSOC is a multi-year process during which an organization must provide the following: a complete history of its founding and development; a current list of all members and structures of the organization to demonstrate transparency; its record of continued programmatic service in the areas cited above including full demonstration that these programs and services have a significant international scope; and full disclosure of its financial health and inventory of resources to demonstrate its potential to sustain itself as an organizational service provider. Finally, and most crucially, the organization must demonstrate that it has in the past, and still continues, to provide services and programs in the areas specified without prejudice to race, ethnicity, nationality, religious affiliation, gender or age. This can be a daunting challenge for any organization, particularly for one that is religious-based such as Maryknoll.

At the time that our accreditation process was being considered, the Accreditation Committee consisted of the following Delegations: China, Cuba, India, Tunisia (Chair), the Russian Federation, the United Kingdom and the United States. Any single Delegation could have blocked accreditation for any reason. Lobbying the Delegations before public debate was critical in order that difficult questions or misgivings could be addressed in a slow, deliberate, and verifiable manner.

Maryknoll was advised that the Tunisian Delegation might be under pressure to move slowly on approving a Christian-based missionary organization, but that it would most likely join in approval if all other Delegations were in favor. We were further advised that China, India and the Russian Federation were not in favor of approving religious-based organizations, but that this was less of an impediment for Cuba. Finally, we came to learn that the committee was not inclined to be swayed easily or unduly by the UK or the US view of the organization.

Maryknoll began its lobbying with the Cuban Delegation. After some months the government responded that they knew of Maryknoll and had even been open to having the organization invited into the country. Havana communicated that they anticipated no issues that would impede public discussion of accreditation for Maryknoll.

The nod from Cuba allowed an opening with the Russian Delegation that passed the query to the Russian Patriarchate as well for comment. Both the government and the Patriarchate were aware of Maryknoll's presence in the country's Far East region, and the initial response from Moscow was that if all religious organizations conducted themselves the way Maryknoll did, then the government would not have had to pass the Religious Liberties Law. Moscow offered no impediments to Maryknoll's application.

Hearing of Cuba's and Russia's initial findings, the Chinese Delegation agreed to meet face to face to receive Maryknoll's application and discuss it. The response from Beijing several months later was that the government was aware of all of Maryknoll's activities in China pre- and post-revolution, and that they found no impediment in our applying for status with ECOSOC.

Maryknoll next approached the Indian Delegation. The Delegation official in charge of NGO relations for that Mission did not at first believe that Cuba, China and the Russian Federation offered no impediment to the application. He assured me that he would check out the claim very thoroughly, but that if it proved true, then India, not knowing us directly, would follow the vote of the other three during the public hearings.

The UK and the US Delegations received the application and after a few days they communicated that they would give support to Maryknoll during the public hearing.

Finally Maryknoll approached the committee chair, Tunisia, and disclosed the results of its consultations with the committee's member Delegations. The chair indicated that despite what Maryknoll was told by individual Delegations in face to face meetings, it would be very tough for a partisan religious group to successfully defend an application in open, recorded discussion in the ECOSOC chambers.

The record of the public hearings that day shows that, despite repeated requests from the chair for questions from the member Delegations to Maryknoll's representatives at the UN, no questions were raised, save the simple statements from each Delegation that they supported the application. The chair then ruled that Maryknoll be granted consultative status with the Economic and Social Council. I don't know if that was the shortest public hearing for an organization's application for ECOSOC status in UN history, but it certainly was the shortest session that day in which many, many other applications were being considered.

Now you know the rest of the story.

Call for Articles for Our Next Issue

Date: December 2007

Theme: Making a Small Difference in Africa

Material to Editor by: 15 October 2007

Please send material to the Editor, Joe Healey, by Email to:

JGHealey@aol.com or by paper mail to: Maryknoll Society House,
P.O. Box 43058, Nairobi, Kenya (for scanning into a computer).