

Soroti, Uganda: Center of the Universe

“For what does it profit a man to gain the whole word, yet lose his soul?”

I wasn't expecting it. But the joyful harmonies and music rung through the packed church. The music of Mass has a different rhythm, with the traditional drums and finger pianos blending perfectly with the electronic organ and in a way that let me imagine I was enjoying the songs of the choirs of angels in heaven. Such moments in life are rare. The previous week had been exhilarating to my mind, but this went deeper, touching my soul with insight and clarity, as if perhaps God Himself had called me to that place and time. I thought of all the people I love the most and wished they were there to experience it. One simply needs to attend Mass in Uganda.

There I was in the chapel of St. Peter's Minor Seminary in Soroti. Soroti, a town in eastern Uganda of 60,000 people. Soroti, where Catholic devotion and vocations are high, but people are so poor that some forty years after being named a diocese, they still are struggling to raise the money needed to finally build a cathedral. My friend, Fr. Samuel Okiria, preached a heartfelt homily to the teenage boys, most of whom have very little means. Reflecting on the readings, he urged them to “remember their Creator”, “rejoice in their youth”, “love the Holy Eucharist”, and spread the “Gospel of Joy”. It seemed that the young men were already experiencing the same joy that I was, and my friend, who himself had attended the seminary decades earlier, connected with them. Indeed, the greatest laughter was reserved for the inside seminary jokes that I couldn't fully understand.

As a professor of economics, and a development economist, I had spent the previous week in western Uganda focusing on research that might address the sometimes overwhelming economic challenges that the Ugandan people face. I would spend the days that followed talking to Ugandan economists at the Bank of Uganda and Ministry of Finance about economic policy, what they knew and what they didn't, and how research might best inform their policy. How to promote investment and development in peri-urban that are the seeds of growth? How can we address high dropout rates from primary school in these areas, which have only been exasperated by COVID lockdowns, which were the longest in the world? How can we get tiny firms to grow to the kind that can offer employment opportunities to young men and women who do complete school? How do we bring vital financial services to the rural poor?

These are the types of questions that motivate our work, and there was so much to learn. COVID had prevented recent trips to Uganda until now, and the emergence of Ebola is another new threat to our work, but field trips are absolutely vital to development researchers. When one lives with the luxuries of an elite university like Notre Dame, even development economists who have seen these conditions countless times appreciate reminders of how much of the world lives, and the wheels of the mind start spinning anew.

There has been much improvement in recent years in Uganda, including since my last visit. A system of paved roads extended out to all areas we visited, as did electrical lines. The lines were at least there and operational, however erratic the service may be. These investments, along with other factors, had caused land prices in peri-urban areas to rise rapidly in recent years, as people anticipate future growth and investment. So, while the challenges are real, so too is the progress.

It is this combination of genuine appreciation for the tough economic realities of the global poor, the genuine hope of progress, and the conviction that policies can help promote such progress that motivates Notre Dame's new research center for Building Inclusive Growth, the BIG Lab.

But it is not my research, but Soroti, that is the center of the universe and the center of this story. My coming to Soroti is its own improbable story. In the depths of COVID lockdown, I received an email from an unknown person in Uganda who had found me on the internet and claimed to be a Catholic priest. We all receive emails from people who just need our bank account details so they can wire us \$30 million. Professors receive many more emails from aspiring scholars in foreign countries requesting for us to host them as visitors, and we usually delete all of these without responding or usually even reading. Perhaps it was Providence, but something caught my eye in this email; the sincerity of it caught my attention after reading it, and I responded. Fr. Sam, originally from a small village in Soroti but now a professor of philosophy at Uganda Martyrs Seminary, and I quickly became friends, messaging each other and sharing prayers. He had visited the USA and I had worked in Uganda, and we had a shared faith, mutual interest in Catholic social thought, and mutual concern for the poor. I responded early on to Fr. Sam that it seems that we are in love with the same things.

Now, celebrating Mass in Soroti with the Fr. Sam, his sister, brother-in-law, fellow priests and the seminarians, I appreciate a new side of Uganda and Fr. Sam and Uganda. Fr. Sam has a natural connection with others, not only a scholar but a pastor. I see that same connection the next day between Bishop Joseph Eciru Oliach the congregation, which is only half of whom can actually fit inside the “cathedral”. Attending Mass in Soroti, one can see how deep the faith is part of who the people are. It is not merely something to attend on Sunday because of your heritage. Mass was an expression of joy, a source of strength, and an experience of communion and community.

Soroti, like the rest of Uganda is extremely religious. This is especially true in rural areas of Uganda., where a mix of Catholics, Protestants, and Muslims live together. One immediately sees that religion is central. Mosques, churches, public schools named after saints are everywhere, but it goes beyond that. One notices it in the given names of the people you meet, Innocent, Grace, Immaculate, John Bosco, Gratia Deo, and of course Charles Lwanga, the most famous of the Ugandan Martyrs. One even sees it in the names of the businesses with names like “Jesus Mercy Beauty Salon,” “God’s Love Pork Joint,” or “Bismillah Trucking”. As I stand in the Church, worshipping together with the people that I try to serve in my work, I can truly appreciate that their faith is central not only to who they are, but to who they are as a community. And even though I am a wealthy, white, American, I too connect, in a more invisible way, through their devotion because I sense that in the Mass, we all express the same love together and all receive from the same one God.

Soroti is also extremely poor. Again, this becomes stronger as one goes toward the rural outskirts. After Saturday Mass at the seminary, we visit Fr. Sam’s childhood home. On the way, we visit the home of Fr. Sam’s grandmother, who still lives in a circular hut of mud with grass roof, where she sleeps on the ground. Fr. Sam’s own father is a school teacher, so the home has a metal roof (that collects rain water for washing) and brick walls, but fetching drinking water still requires a long walk or bike ride to the community well.

At the Bishop’s Mass the next day, this Sunday’s Gospel is fittingly the story of the Rich Man and Lazarus, where the rich man has all the good things in his life, and Lazarus has little, but in the afterlife, these things are reversed. I squirm a little uncomfortable in my seat, realizing who I most resemble, especially in this situation. But Bishop Joseph is too wise of a shepherd to increase my discomfort in any way. “Let us get some exercise,” he declares. “Raise your hand if you have everything you need in this life...Okay, now raise your hand if you have no blessings to share in this life.” After a complete lack of exercise in the congregation, he explains, “So we are all the rich man in some ways, and we are all Lazarus in some ways. At some points in life, we are all beggars, and at other times we are called to be donors.”

By simple extrapolation of this thought, it is clear that this materially poor community has so much to offer our secular American society and even our church in the United States. Perhaps the most concrete way is vocations, where they have an abundance, and many of our parish priests are increasingly donated by

developing countries in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia. Their religion spills over to a love of family and community that we've lost in recent times. Joy, devotion, and vision are other gifts they have to offer. Although they lack funding, the Church in Soroti is robust and growing. I tour the site of future cathedral, and I see the plans for it as a center of a thriving Catholic community. I see the Uganda Martyrs Technical School that they have built, again with meager funds and immense resourcefulness, to teach practical skills to young men and women. I visit the youth center, where they will be hosting a national congress for Catholic youth in the coming months. I look at what they have accomplished in their forty years as a diocese, with very little material resources, and I can't help but contrast that with the decline of the Church in the United States, where now 2 in 5 adults under 40 have no religion at all. Their attitude and vision come in striking contrast to Church life in many parts of the United States, and especially in western Europe, where our attitudes can often be to view the Church as merely a defensive fort desperately holding out against the irresistible forces of secular society. It reminds me that the mission of the Church is outreach and evangelization. "Go out to all the world, baptizing them."

The Church in Soroti has much to offer us, and yet there are many ways we can help the Ugandans as well. One of these is of course in helping materially and donating from our wealth. But my mind comes back to my work as an economist. Development economists are not generally religious people. Among most economists, indeed most academics, attitudes toward religion can vary from dismissive, to antagonistic, to ridiculing. Perhaps the tolerant-but-unbelieving are willing to recognize that religion plays some role in society, and while such a role might serve a social purpose, it is an unfortunate role.

Back in Mass, it occurs to me that a shared respect for the things that a people love is important if one is to truly to serve and love. What are the things that people are willing to die for, or at least they hope they would be willing to die for? What are they not willing to die for, or at least they hope they wouldn't be? Even if one embraces a relativist view: how can we truly help people, if we don't value what they value? How can we really respect people, if we condescend toward what is most dear to them. If it prophesies a man not to gain the whole world, yet lose his soul, the the same must also be true for a community. The question for a development economist then becomes, "How can we promote development, while not destroying losing the soul of a community, those things of greatest value to life?" One cannot serve both God and Mammon.

Again, such questions are not common in academia, and it reflects a condescension and inconsistency in our approach. Outside of Notre Dame, in the boards and committees I sit on, there are strong pushes for diversity and inclusion, but the religious voice is not a dimension that is deemed necessary to include, despite the fact that Uganda is no outlier among developing countries. In my work in Brazil, Colombia, Mexico, and Uganda, I can witness some ambivalence among the elites, but among the poor religion is central to life. It isn't just Catholic countries though. In Thailand, Buddhism is everywhere. In India, Hinduism dominates, while in Bangladesh and Pakistan, it is Islam. Certainly, religious identity can and does lead to conflicts, but in an age where self-definition is paramount, it at least underscores that religion is core to people's own sense of identity. I would venture to say that at the typical university, typical international decision-making body, perhaps the most underrepresented group is the devoutly religious.

Herein perhaps lies the singular mission of a Catholic development economist. In the crass words of economics, the respect for religion at Notre Dame's economics department is a comparative advantage. It allows us to truly respect the people whom we study, and it allows us to appreciate what they have of value. I try to think how this might become foundational to the BIG Lab's work, but it will require more thought. Perhaps it may go so far as to reframe the ways we think about development and development policy. After all, ultimately we are all just brothers and sisters, children of God.

As Mass reaches the apex of the Allelulia chorus, I am caught up with worshipping the community, caught somewhere between thought thought, contemplation, and perhaps the closest thing to ecstasy that a poor

sinner can experience. The Lord is present to me, as our the choirs of angels. I am much more aware of the Mass as a re-presentation of the eternal banquet and sacrifice in Heaven. This is the reality of the Mass. Soroti has become the center of the Universe indeed.