

## Hope for Chad

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**O**VER the past few months we have had two sets of experiences in particular that have led me to reflect on the subject of women, and specifically women and prayer. Many of the differences between the prayer of men and women can be attributed to our very different socialization. There are also differences, I believe, which flow from the particular situations and circumstances of women, particularly poor or marginalized women. That is the case with the experiences I want to write about.

The first is connected with the March 8th International Day of Women. A group of women from Grand Chagoua, the three-parish area to which our sector of Am Toukoui belongs, decided to celebrate the day with a prayer vigil for peace. They agreed to prepare for this vigil by a series of meetings for the four weeks preceding March 8th.

Here in Chad, as in many parts of the world, prayer for peace is not a theoretical exercise. Since its independence in 1960, the country has been torn by the violence engendered by dictators, successive coups, civil wars, and regional, ethnic and religious tensions. The beginning of the Conference National Souveraine on January 15th had exacerbated ordinary people's apprehensions about renewed violence, rather than allaying them, because they feared the Conference would provide an excuse for renewed intergroup hostilities or government crackdown.

Instead of trying to pray away their fears, the women, all of them wives and mothers of families, gathered at the four preparatory meetings to reflect on the gospel and on their own experience. They prayed and discussed together about concrete ways in which they might work for peace. They identified obstacles to peace in their daily lives — such things as fear of the political insecurity; the problems of being a 'co-épouse' in a polygamous marriage; regular drunkenness or abusiveness of their husbands; the lack of income in the family other than what the woman

might gain by selling groundnuts, soap, or other small items.

At various times Anne, Jo and I attended these preparatory meetings. We had no function other than to accompany our sisters, and to witness to their faith and courage. An NDA (Nôtre Dame des Apotres) sister worked with the leaders who planned the meetings, but all the women present took responsibility for participating in the prayer, witness, and song. Many of the women came with babies on their backs, whom they nursed during the meetings.

Each week the numbers of women grew — from about 20 at the first meeting to well over 100 at the fourth. At the final celebration on March 8th over 300 women gathered in a service of prayer, readings and song. It was conducted entirely by the women of the three sectors; the participation by all the women present was full of energy and hope.

Being part of this experience early on in our life here was a great gift for me. Meeting and coming to know women from the three sectors, and especially from our own of Am Toukoui; hearing at first hand of the constraints and hardships of their lives; and witnessing their resilience and strength were tremendously heartening for me.

And the peace vigil and its preparation was an experience, not a series of events. I don't know that it would be particularly helpful to theorize about what a group of men might have come up with, but I'm pretty sure it would have been different. In one sense women in Chad have a subservient role; but at the same time they are in many ways the sustainers and providers of family and community. A French priest who has been here for many years told us that if there is any hope for Chad it will come from the women. Those weeks from January to early March explained and confirmed his statement for me.

The second experience of women praying has been very different from the first. Early in January we heard, through a sister of another community, about a group of young Camerounian women (mostly late teens to mid-20s) who work as prostitutes in downtown N'Djamena and come often to the weekday evening eucharist at the cathedral. The pastor of the cathedral had got to know the women when they came to him in concern over one of their friends who had been diagnosed with AIDS. He had ideas

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about a project to teach them trades like sewing or cooking so as to enable them to change their lives. Because it seemed important to know and be known by the young women before launching such a project, if ever, some of us began meeting with them once a week. At one of our early meetings, we asked the young women what they hoped for from our coming together. I took notes of what they said; and I list their hopes here in the order of occurrence not priority, using their own words:

- to pray together before Mass once a week
- to express our problems
- to learn to knit, sew, cook, even to iron
- to know the Lord Jesus
- to give a day (earnings) to the church for poor people
- to borrow books on prayer
- to learn about the mysteries of the rosary

Since January one or more of us have gone to the cathedral once a week for the evening eucharist. For quite a while we met with the women after the liturgy. They would speak a little about the gospels and mostly ask for rosaries, prayer books and leaflets (there was a catholic bookstore near where we were then living and the women reimbursed us for anything we bought).

Several months ago the women repeated their request for prayer once a week before Mass. Since then we have been going to the chapel in the cathedral basement an hour before eucharist each Friday, as we had agreed. While we are praying down there enjoying the calm and solitude, those young women who come early are upstairs in the daily Mass chapel, with leaflets, well-worn prayer sheets and notebooks of copied-out prayers.

Did they not mean their request for prayer together? I think they did; but each has her own familiar, perhaps necessary, prayers, and it is hard to give them up for an hour of communal prayer even once a week.

From the beginning, I noticed other signs of what I thought of as compulsiveness in the way the women pray. Each has a pile of booklets and prayer sheets and goes from one to another, often with actions or

postures to accompany a particular prayer. They usually say the rosary or read the bible during eucharist; after Mass most make a visit to the Blessed Sacrament altar, not stopping to speak until the visit has been accomplished.

The relationship with these young Camerounian women has been as much an experience of mystery to me as the more familiar, initially more congenial, experience with the women of Grand Chegoua. I don't understand the young women's lives; their way of praying is alien to me, and at the beginning I had to resist the urge to point out a 'better' way to pray. But knowing them makes irrelevant any kind of judgment I might be tempted to make. They are who they are, Pelagie and Marie Claire and Eugenie and many others, and knowing them has enriched me. They pray as they need and know how to pray, and it's precisely what strikes me as foreign in their prayer that helps me to understand the uselessness of evaluating it. I know their experience of intense individual prayer is sustaining to them in a difficult existence, as the solidarity of shared prayer and reflection was for the women of Grand Chagoua. In both cases, I have gained from encountering other women praying.