

# JUST FAITH AND ACTION:

## A BI-MONTHLY THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION FROM THE WASHINGTON OFFICE ON AFRICA

No. 6

DECEMBER 2001

### *More fresh air*

In P.D. James' latest novel, *Death in Holy Orders*, a physician offers this prescription for a sick seminarian: "Less theology and more fresh air."

Now I don't really believe that, not if we embrace the call to "do" theology rather than study theology, as South African theologians challenged us to do during the anti-apartheid struggle. Nor do I, at this Christmas season, want to diminish the theological meaning of the birth of Jesus that a prescription of less theology might suggest.

But James isn't just being clever. She has a thought there that appeals to me. Consider a Sudanese woman who was meeting with a group of us a few days ago. She said: "I grew up in the war. I became a mother during the war. I am about to become a grandmother, and it is still the same war." In one sense this may be a touching thought but not a particularly deep one — it hardly represents sophisticated theological discourse — but for me it is nevertheless profound... and it **is** fresh air.

It is fresh air when it is juxtaposed against the maneuverings of the Sudanese, north and south. It is fresh air when we examine the most recent US initiative, where talk is of "internationally-supported verification mechanisms" to monitor bombardment of civilians, of "military stand-downs to facilitation" efforts to eradicate polio, of limited cease-fire agreements, and of the Khartoum government's permitting investigations of means to prevent slavery while rejecting the contention that slavery exists.

I do not mean to diminish the significance of these steps, and they mark the often sad reality of how things work. Maybe a limited cease-fire period in the Nuba Mountains alone — Senator Danforth, the special envoy, calls them "days of tranquility" — can move us forward to a more general and long-term cease-fire. But when I look at this State Department "theology" and then hear the words that now "I am about to become a grandmother, and it is still the same war," how revealing it is to turn my attention instead to the latter, and to reflect upon the reality of the Sudan as it is lived, and has been lived for several generations.

Fresh air, I am finding, comes most frequently from grassroots insights, seemingly simple thoughts that bring us back to our common humanity. "Verification mechanisms" matter, but they matter only because they may slowly advance to a point where, despite a conflict that is approaching fifty years on, it is no longer "still the same war," indeed, no longer war at all. But fresh air matters more as it comes, from across Africa, from women's groups, from civil society initiatives, from local parishes and lay leaders and pastors who say that it is enough, these diplomatic maneuverings and allusions to international complexities. What I hear are people saying we will do what we can. Our task is to hear them, and then to stand up, with them, and say too that it is enough. That will truly offer fresh air to a suffering world... and it will be refreshing theology as well.

Yours faithfully,  
Leon Spencer

---

If there are others you would like us to send these reflections to, please pass their names and addresses on to us.  
Alternatively, if these reflections are unhelpful, just let us know and we'll remove you from our list.

The Washington Office on Africa, 212 East Capitol Street, Washington, DC 20003