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Religion

They Come Back Singing: Finding God with the Refugees
Gary Smith
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Entire families fled southern Sudan during the civil war, but rarely did they survive whole. “I had eleven children; four remain,” Taban from a Ugandan refugee camp said. “Three have died of disease, and four were shot when we were fleeing Sudan.”

Despite thousands of stories of desperate escape and grinding poverty, what Gary Smith, a Catholic priest and Society of Jesus (Jesuit) member, found in the lives and faces of the refugees was hope, faith, and God’s love. Before the situation in Darfur developed, the twenty-year civil war in Sudan killed two million people and displaced four million others.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, working with a number of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) including the Jesuit Refugee Service, tried to improve lives with programs for education, health, medicine, and water facility construction.

Smith arrived in Africa in 2000, fresh from the impoverished streets of Portland, Oregon, where he ministered to poor and homeless people.

Already the author of two books, *Radical Compassion: Finding Christ in the Heart of the Poor* and *Street Journal*, Smith came to Uganda to accompany, serve, and advocate for the mostly Christian population of the refugee settlements. Smith is struck by the strength and ability to overcome and survive life’s hardships. “I think I am touching a grace that cuts through the hard rocks of the refugee’s life, something deeper,” he writes. “It is their faith, their unsinkable faith.” It is in these moments, person to person, that Smith feels the hand of God moving his life toward deeper faith and usefulness.

Through his interactions, documented in journal-style chapters, Smith lifts individuals out of the obscurity of statistics. He introduces many people, including Jacelin, a young girl with a cleft lip who he helps find a surgeon to reveal her smile; Yayo, a woman crippled by arthritis who is thrilled to have someone visit her to hear her confession; and Pamela, a determined fourteen-year-old who walked sixty dangerous miles just to have a chance to go to secondary

school.

By sharing their stories, Smith unveils the inspiringly heart-wrenching lives of individuals who struggle to survive each day as they wait to return to their homes.

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