Soroti, Uganda: Center of the Universe

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

I am not expecting it. There I am in the chapel of St. Peter’s Minor Seminary in Soroti with the joyful harmonies and music ringing through the packed church. The music of Mass there has a different rhythm, with the traditional drums and finger pianos (*kalimbas*) blending perfectly with the electronic organ and in a way that lets me imagine I am 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. 7500 miles away from my life in Granger, Ind., I am home. I think of all the people I love the most – my wife, kids, family, friends, colleagues – and wish they were with me to experience it. One simply needs to attend Mass in Uganda.

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 40 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 discerning vocation, 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 can we promote investment and development in peri-urban areas that are the seeds of growth? How can we address high dropout rates from primary school in these areas, which have only been exacerbated by COVID lockdowns that 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 prevented recent trips to Uganda until now, and the emergence of Ebola is another new threat to our work, but time in the field is 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 the simple economic realities that so many people in the world face, and the wheels of the mind start spinning anew.

Despite the poverty and difficulties, there has been much improvement in recent years in Uganda, including since my last visit. A system of paved roads now extends 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. Promoting inclusive growth means moving beyond research focused only on aid programs and charity. Instead, it means identifying, measuring, and evaluating the large-scale obstacles that inhibit the societies of low income countries from escaping poverty. In my experience, the people in these countries are overwhelmingly hardworking, resourceful, and resilient. More than needing aid, they simply need a well-functioning economy so that they can help themselves. The BIG Lab is big because it focuses on the larger issues that limit people and larger policies to address them.

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 about the subject line caught my eye, and once I started reading the email, the sincerity of it grabbed my attention. I immediately sent a reply. Since then, Fr. Samuel Okiria and I quickly became friends, frequently messaging each other and sharing prayers. Originally from a small village in Soroti, Fr. Sam is now a professor of philosophy at Uganda Martyrs Seminary. He had visited the US 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, "It seems that we have a great deal of shared passions."

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 as a scholar but as a pastor. I see that same connection the next day between Bishop Joseph Eciru Oliach and the congregation, only half of whom can actually fit inside the church given the lack of a cathedral. Attending Mass in Soroti, one can see how deeply the faith is part of who the people are. Mass is not merely something to attend on Sunday because of your heritage. It is an expression of joy, a source of strength, an experience of communion and community, and a testament to the centrality of the Lord in all things.

The rest of Uganda, like Soroti, is very 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 and churches 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 notices it in the myriad schools, even public schools, named after saints. One even sees it in the names of the businesses, such as “Jesus Mercy Beauty Salon,” “God’s Love Pork Joint,” or “Bismillah Trucking.” As I stand in the Church, worshiping 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 as individuals, but to who they are as a community. And even though I am a wealthy white American, I feel part of them 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’s poverty also becomes increasingly evident as one goes toward the rural outskirts. After Saturday Mass at the seminary, we visit Fr. Sam’s childhood home. On the way, we visited the home of Fr. Sam’s grandmother, a circular hut with mud walls, a grass roof, and a dirt floor where she sleeps. Her son, Fr. Sam’s father, has a relatively high-paying job as a school teacher, so his home has homemade brick walls and a metal roof. The roof is useful for collecting rainwater for washing, but fetching drinking water still requires regular long walks or bike rides 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, in which the rich man, who has all the good things in his life, is indifferent to Lazarus’ lack of basic necessities, but in the afterlife, their situations are reversed. I squirm a little uncomfortably in my seat, acutely aware of whom I most resemble in this situation. But Bishop Eciru Oliach is too gentle and wise of a shepherd to increase my discomfort in any way. “Raise your hand if you have everything you need in this life,” he requests of us. “Okay, now raise your hand if you have no blessings to share in this life.” After a complete lack of hands to either query, 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, each one of us is a beggar, and at other times we are each 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 example is vocations, which they have in abundance, and many of our parish priests increasingly come from developing countries in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia. Their religion spills over to a love of family and community, an appreciation for children, and a compassion and concern for the needs of the poorest amongst them. All of these feel more tenuous in American society. Joy and devotion are other gifts they have to offer.

Perhaps the greatest is a sense of vision for the Church. Although they lack funding, the Church in Soroti is robust and growing. I toured the site of the future cathedral, which is just underway leveling the cleared land. I see the big plans for it - for which they are locally campaigning for a US $2 contribution each by one million benefactors - very slow in coming as one would expect! Alongside the cathedral will be an entire compound to act as a center of a thriving Catholic community and a visual testament to what they value in life. 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 visited 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 40 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 there were four times as many Catholics as people with no religion in the early 1980s but those with no religion now outnumber Catholics today. Bishop Eciru Oliach and Fr. Sam's attitude and dreams come in striking contrast to Church life in many parts of the United States, and especially in western Europe, where our dreams are limited to viewing 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 peoples, baptizing them…" (Matthew 28:19) How much of this difference is due to economic development? Technology? Other global forces?

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. There are cultural dimensions too where we have much to offer – a deeper respect for women and their place in society, for example, and an emphasis on educating the young, things certainly appreciated by Bishop Eciru Oliach and Fr. Sam.

My mind, however, comes back to my work as an economist. Development economists are not generally religious people. Indeed, among economists more generally and even most academics, attitudes toward religion can vary from dismissive to antagonistic to ridiculing to tolerant-but-unbelieving. Those with the more tolerant attitudes may be willing to recognize that religion plays some role in society and even some social function, but for most it still remains a situation that the irreligious lament.

Back in Mass, as the gifts are being offered, it occurs to me that a shared respect for the things that a people love is critical if one is to truly serve and love. A series of important questions stream through my head. What are the things that people are willing to die for? What are people not willing to die for? What do they hope they would not be willing to die for? Even if one embraces a relativist view: How can we truly help people, if we don't value what they value? As social scientists, how can we really respect people, if we condescend toward what is most dear to them?

"For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?" The same must also be true for a community. Perhaps the really big question for a development economist then becomes, "How can we promote development, while not losing, let alone destroying, 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 the lack of such important questions 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. The indifference to

religious representation in leadership is striking given the fact that Uganda is no outlier among developing countries. In my work in Brazil, Colombia, Mexico, and Uganda, I occasionally witness some ambivalence among the elites, but among the poor, religion is central to life. It isn't just Catholic countries. 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 or international decision-making body, perhaps the most underrepresented group is the devoutly religious.

Herein lies perhaps 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," a niche where we can make a real contribution. Our respect for religion, even beyond Catholicism, 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, and what are the possibilities. Technology, media, and greed are all powerful forces to try to resist. Yet, there is consolation in knowing that communities are stronger than individuals. Perhaps it may go so far as to reframe the ways we think about development and development policy.

All of this clearly requires more thought of course. Apparently, epiphanies at Mass don't always come with practical insights. There is certainly a level of naivete and idealism in my musings. The economic and social problems in Uganda are manifold, just as they are in the United States. Real progress requires serious thought, precisely the domain of a university professor's work. But appreciating the value and values of the other is a necessary starting point for such thought. It is an imperative that stems from solidarity: we are all children of God.

As Mass approaches its apex and the congregation prays the Holy, Holy, Holy chorus, I am caught up in worship with the community, caught somewhere between thought, contemplation, and perhaps the closest thing to ecstasy that a poor sinner can experience. I am aware that the Lord is present to me, as are the Communion of saints and 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. For an hour in time, Soroti has indeed become the Center of the Universe indeed.