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Jesuit author meets with local reading group

By **LISA MAXSON**
Catholic Voice



Father Gary Smith, SJ, speaks to Janine ter Kuile, who works in Creighton's Student Financial Aid Office, during a special luncheon April 8 in the basement of St. John Church on the Creighton campus in Omaha. Father Smith met with university staff and faculty who had read his book "They Come Back Singing," which is about his years as a mission priest in northern Uganda. Lisa Maxson/Staff

"Father Smith's book is so powerful because it lets us into the light of those refugee camps, and he reveals his own ministry the way in which those people cope with their lives and the way they celebrate with their faith, their dancing and their prayer," Alexander said.

For him, the book's lesson is simple: "We need to place our trust in God and the more we are in touch with our own poverty, we can feel solidarity with those people who have tremendous poverty."

Reactions to book

Roger Bergman, director of Creighton's Justice and Peace Studies Program, said he liked the book because it equally portrayed the suffering.

"Many of my students from the Justice and Peace Program and a lot of other students at Creighton have some experience encountering poverty and injustice, and they frequently will come back and say, 'These people have so much less than I do but they seem so much happier.' I'm always a little uncomfortable with that because it tends to downplay the real suffering in the world," Bergman said. "My appreciation for the book on that level is that although it portrayed the capacity for joy in the refugees in the worst of circumstances, Father Smith never backed away from saying these are the worst of circumstances."

Bergman also said the book, for him, evoked a feeling of shame and confusion.

For some faculty and staff members of Creighton University, meeting author Father Gary Smith, SJ, at a luncheon April 8 was an emotional experience.

Most of the 25 people present were visibly moved when they shared their feelings about "They Come Back Singing," Father Smith's book about being a missionary in Africa through Jesuit Relief Services, and his life-changing experience with Sudanese refugees.

The group was part of a Creighton faculty-staff Lenten reading group that evolved into a reading group from 11 countries and five continents. Connected by Creighton's Online Ministries Web site, 50 people from around the world reflected on the book and shared their thoughts online.

Father Andy Alexander, SJ, one of the coordinators of Creighton's Online Ministries, said he thought Father Smith's book was important to read because it shows the work of the Jesuits.

"The Society of Jesus in the U.S. and most recently the general congregation that we have emphasized again that among our highest priorities are those people who are most in need of the world, particularly those people who are victims of war and displaced by war, particularly those who are refugees in their own country or in another country," Father Alexander said.

The book also tells the story of the refugees' faith, he said.

Want the book?

You can find "They Come Back Singing" and Father Gary Smith's other books at amazon.com

"There are several times in the book when Father Gary alludes to his outrage about the decisions, the policies that have been in place, the actions of people that create refugee situations and this incredible suffering and vicious murders and massacres. My most basic honest response to this is shame and confusion. This is a world I'm part of. We shouldn't treat people this way. This doesn't get me righteously indignant, what will? I think it's good to be reminded of that."

Maryanne Rouse was moved by Father Smith's ministry of presence to the people he served.

"I think the gift of our spirituality is to try to be attentive to our experience and in reflection of it give back," said Rouse, coordinator of the leadership program for the College of Business Administration. "However, if one is not attentive to the things that are happening, they are missed whatever's going on."

Lessons learned

Father Smith was in northern Uganda just south of the Sudan border from 2000 to 2007. Much of "They Come Back Sing" is drawn from his daily journal entries.

He said he was honored to hear the reactions people had to his book.

He wanted to write the book for several reasons, including his need to express where his heart was at during his years as a missionary.

"I thought it was important to share the best I could of something of the people I knew there with my culture and then I wanted to give an expression of a Jesuit voice in the world," he told the Catholic Voice.

The 70-year-old priest, who continues to stay in touch with many of his friends in Uganda by e-mail and phone, said through his experience as a missionary he has learned a lot about the poor, the church, and about how God used his experiences to prepare him for other parts of his life.

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