

Sister Emmanuelle : A View from the Slums of Cairo

In Cairo, in a place called Matareya, live 4000 'zabbalins' or garbage collectors in sub-human conditions – in environments similar to those of the 'villas miserias' of Buenos Aires, the 'favelas' of Mexico, the 'barradas' of Lima and the slums of Bombay and Calcutta. Among them lives a 76-year-old nun, Sister Emmanuelle, who chose to spend the rest of her life with the disfavored of the earth, to share their suffering and joys, their misery and their faith.

Who is this remarkable woman and why did she choose this kind of life:

Sister Emmanuelle, whose real name is Madelaine Cinquin, was born in Brussels November 16, 1908, of French parents. A difficult child in a well-to-do middle-class family, she was sent to England after high school to perfect her English at a 'Sisters of Zion' establishment in the London suburb of Holloway.

It is there where she decided to become a nun and "give herself to God in order to serve her brothers, "for it was for her the only way, she said, to fulfill herself completely. Religious life seemed to answer her two most important principles in life: union with God and the service of others.

Right after she said her vows, she decided to work with needy children. In 1931 she was sent to Turkey, then Tunisia, then Alexandria (in Egypt), where she taught French in private schools.

One day, she said, a little girl told her, "yesterday we had nothing to eat at home." The following day the little girl also said, "last night we ate at the neighbors' because there still was nothing to eat at home."

This incident was to change the life of Sister Emmanuelle, who decided to work only for the poor and live among them.

She was 62 years old when she decided to ask to be transferred to work with lepers. Her request was granted. But because the lepers quarters were in a military zone she was transferred after the 1967 Arab-Israeli war to Matareya to work with the garbage collectors, the 'zabbalin' of Cairo. She decided to live with them in a little hut resembling their own.

Dawn, starts the zabbalins' day. Men and children come out of their little huts, take their donkeys and go towards the big city that's starting to wake up. They go from house to house collecting garbage.

As soon as they are 4 or 5 years old children accompany their father and while the latter goes from house to house, flat to flat, to pick up the garbage bins, the children guard the donkey.

Between noon and 1p.m., under a burning sun, the garbage collectors go back to their quarters with their heavy loads. The women and their toddlers, covered with flies, await for them, for all have to work if they want to survive. The garbage is unloaded with naked hands and sorted out into piles. A large part is made of unwanted kitchen left-overs which are given to the pigs. There is also a big quantity of unwanted clothes, old rags, etc., which are made into a first pile. A second pile is made of empty tin cans, a third of bottles and plastic boxes. Thus, in the apparent disorder of this slum exists a certain order.

The children search for broken toys, a bicycle wheel to play with ... There is even a 'cafe' in this place with three shaky tables and some old straw chairs. One can drink tea, coffee and even alcohol, which is very often made with household 900 alcohol. It is slightly diluted, colored red, and sold very cheaply.

Sister Emmanuelle starts her day very early going first to mass at the Carmelite Convent in Matareya, then back to the slum where she visits some families. She is never in a hurry. She is always ready to listen to everyone, to talk, comfort encourage and explain. She speaks in a rather heavy Arabic accent.

All her activities are guided by one main belief: to be always at the service of others. All her life is centered around a unique principle, the necessity to love.

When the sun sets, it gets cooler in the slum, so she goes to pray with one of the families. She knows she cannot change their miserable life, but this does not discourage her. **The essential things she believes, is to love them like they are, handsome or ugly, honest or thief, good or bad.**

Matareya is not the only slum in Cairo: there is a bigger one situated in the cemetery where at least 30,000 people live due to lack of housing. She goes to visit this other slum regularly, too.

"The expansion of slums in most developing cities is one of the major problems of our world," says Sister Emmanuelle. Trying to solve this problem, she adds, should be one of the main preoccupations of governments.



Moreover, according to her, there are six very important tasks awaiting the leaders of nations. These are: 1) To preserve peace in the world. 2) To provide each individual with the right for good health. 3) To provide him/her with sufficient clean water. 4) To make sure that no one dies hungry. 5) To allow each couple to decide on the number of children it wants to have. 6) To control the anarchistic growth of big urban agglomerations.

At the beginning of her stay at Matareya, the Sister felt a certain tension between the 3000 Christian Copts and the 1000 Moslems living there. She tried hard to create a harmonious atmosphere, especially among children. She taught them that Jesus loves all people whatever their religion is.

"As for Muslims," she declares, "they are persuaded that God is just and forgiving, and that everything that happens on earth has a positive and good aspect to it. They have a profound belief in 'quadar' or fate.

The situation of women in present-day Egypt believes the Sister, has not improved much. "Jihan Sadat, the wife of late President Anwar Sadat, has made a sincere and real effort towards the improvement of women's status in Egypt. One of Mrs. Sadat's major achievements has been to push her husband to promulgate a law on repudiation of marriage without having to pass it through parliament."

Before this law came into effect, a husband

could say "I divorce thee" three times for the wife to find herself out in the street. With the new law, when a woman is repudiated, she has the right to stay at home with all that's in it and it's the husband that gets out.

In the Matareya slum, as in all slums, the situation of the woman is very bad. Married very young, she has a child almost every year. She gives birth in very unhygienic conditions. There are no midwives nor doctors, only an old woman with "experience" who uses any sharp object at her disposition to cut the umbilical cord!

This is why Sister Emmanuelle finds that one of the most urgent matters is to create a health care centre in the slum, where women could give birth in hygienic conditions, and men and children could get proper medical treatment. The other major problem facing the slum dwellers is the problem of family planning.

"Muslim women, says the Sister "are devout believers and think that babies come from God". By comparison, she adds, the Coptic Orthodox Church has a very realistic attitude towards contraception. It tries to explain to young mothers the inconveniences of a large family and the advantages of a reduced one.

Moreover, one of the "calamities" of Matareya is alcohol. "When the men have a bit of extra money," says the nun, "they go to the cafes and drink. Sometimes they beat each other."

One day, a tragic incident made her decide to implement a new project she had never thought about. A bunch of young men were playing cards and drinking alcohol at the slum's cafe. The winning boy asked insistently for his money. His friends who didn't have any to give, and who were all drunk, beat him up and killed him.

The Sister believes that the true culprits for this murder are not the young men who are brought up to resort to violence anytime they feel threatened, but society who allows so much poverty and misery to exist. This is why she decided to set up a recreation club where young men at the slum could gather in a healthy atmosphere. She also wanted to establish a kindergarten, an illiteracy centre and to build a swimming pool.

The "Salam Centre," as it is now known, was built 500 meters from the Matareya slum. It has four main aims; social, cultural, educational and medical. It was inaugurated in 1980 by Jihane Sadat, then the First Lady of Egypt.

The center includes:

1. A dispensary with a general practitioner, a gynecologist and a dentist (both women).
2. A sewing center that is also used for alphabetization.
3. A kindergarten.
4. A workshop that teaches the following skills: carpentry, plumbing, welding, motor mechanics and electrical repairs.
5. A social club especially for cultural activities with a library, cinema and theatre, and a sports center.
6. A kitchen equipped for home economics lessons
7. An old people's home.
8. A nun's home where Sisters and counselors are trained to run and take care of the Salam Center.

For Sister Emmanuelle, life is beautiful: 'Life is made for living.' For her to live means to have a dual relationship: A vertical one with God and a horizontal one with people. "Living," She says, "is not living alone but with others."

But all these projects cost a lot of money, at least \$30,000. So she decided to go to Europe and ask for it. She wrote to her friends and got a letter of recommendation from the archbishop and went on her trip.

Her first stop was Italy where she went to the Vatican, explained her project and got \$1000. Then it was Switzerland, London, Oxford, Brussels, Luxemburg, Aix la Chapelle and other cities in France.

She visited different organizations and made many rewarding encounters and came back to Egypt with the required amount. It was only one year later that she could start building the Kindergarten the illiteracy center, a sewing center and a health dispensary.

But due to inflation, the money she had was not enough, and she went on a second and a third tour of Europe.

This time she wanted to set up a project that she was planning for a long time: the recycling of garbage into compost that would be used to fertilize the land. Unfortunately, this project never saw the light because the slum of Matareya was situated next to an important archeological site.

In 1978, Sister Emmanuelle went on a fourth overseas trip, this time to Canada and the United States, in order to gather some funds for a very important project: the creation of a medical social center.

Life for her is a continual coming and going of hands that stretch out, hold on to each other, touch each other. It is an exchange of eyes, words, smiles, calls All this creates among humans bonds of incomparable solidarity, a sort of collective breathing.

Happiness for her is to love and to share in joy and in suffering.

For this remarkable woman everything stems from one essential belief which is that **human beings are made to love and this love is most perfectly expressed in brotherhood and sisterhood.**

"The world is a mirror," says she, "when you give love to someone, he/she gives it back to you."

Sister Emmanuelle loves young people. She admires their insistence to know the truth, their authenticity and their concern for sharing what they have with others. She likes to listen to them and discuss with them. She finds that they have a sense of solidarity. The hope for the future, she places it in young people.

She also believes in Providence, but not one that would solve all problems. For her, human beings are free and God is always present to show the right path. He is patient and comforting.

The terrible years Sister Emmanuelle spent in Tunisia were the most fruitful of her life, she says. "They modeled my soul and softened it. They made me understand and love better and share the life of the poor. For me, suffering was purification, redemption, resurrection and benediction"

The Salam Center is now under the supervision of Sister Sara, a Coptic nun, who has worked a lot with Sister Emmanuelle. The latter has decided to spend the rest of her life with another community of zabbalins in the Mokattam area, a huge slum area situated on a hill overlooking Cairo.

Sister Emmanuelle has many projects in mind. Among them includes building solid houses, not just huts, where all the zabbalins of Egypt could live in the hope of seeing their situation improve.

It would be a place where they could be one day respected and loved for themselves, as Sister Emmanuelle believes they should.

(1) This account of the life and work of Sister Emmanuelle is taken from a book by Paul Dreyfus entitled: "Soeur Emmanuelle," *Le Centurion*, Paris, 1983. The author, a journalist went especially to Cairo to interview her. The text of this summary was originally written in French by N. Machnouk and translated into English by our co-editor.