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Border camps, Buddhism and building a mission



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Jesuit Services head Sister Denise Coughlan speaks about life in the refugee camps, 'rice Christians' and the challenges of reconciliation.



Photo by: **SEBASTIAN STRANGIO**

Sister Denise Coughlan, director of the Jesuit-backed NGO Jesuit Services, at the group's office in Tuol Kork district.

How did you first end up in Cambodia?

I started off working in the refugee camps on the Thai-Cambodian border. We had this discernment process, to see if by staying in the camps we were just looking after one particular political faction and not really involved with the development of the whole [country]. The decision we finally came to was that some people would stay in the refugee camps and stay with the refugees until the end, that another lot would work

completely outside with the Buddhist monks in advocacy work, and a third group would come into Cambodia. So I was one of the four original people who came into Cambodia from the refugee camps [in 1990].

Which faction was in charge of your camp?

The camp that I was in was controlled by the KPNLF [Khmer People's National Liberation Front]. There were Khmer Rouge camps further down the borderline, but of course they were mostly just civilians who were part of the Khmer Rouge escape route. Then there was the royalist camp, the Sihanoukists. What happened is the people set up schools for themselves and they were helped by aid agencies, and quite a lot of education went on. The people who took their chances, and especially the ones who learned English, did well, but as in Cambodia the great mass of people were still pretty badly off. People lived on the rations: Rice came in on trucks and water came in on trucks, so if you didn't join the education group or get involved with some craft, it was a pretty boring life. There were quite a few who had a dream to get to a third country. Then there was the mass who were sitting in no-man's-land.

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ADVOCATING IF YOU DON'T HAVE GRASSROOTS INVOLVEMENT.

How did your experience in the camps differ from what you encountered inside Cambodia?

Inside the refugee camps, you had a prison city: It was the second-biggest city in the country. There was a life that went from 9 to 5 in the daytime, when the international people were there, and then from 5 until 9 again the next morning when it was just the Cambodian leaders and the Thai guards [in charge]. There was a lot of shelling when I was in the camp. When I came [to Cambodia] in 1989, there was a very controlled freedom. NGOs had to get permission to go anywhere. We were fairly lucky because we were allowed to set up in the countryside.... But here, at least, there was some sense of the future. Cambodia had a chance for people to start forging a future for themselves.

Since then, what has been the biggest change you have noticed in Phnom Penh?

The superficial change has been the change in the roads, the buildings and the physical infrastructure. I think the gap between the rich and the poor is worse now than when I came in 1990. That's my analysis of the situation. I think a lot of the people who are poor are probably a lot less poor than they were when I first came. But the gap is incredible now. I wonder if this city-versus-country class conflict will grow up again, which was the basis for the Pol Pot revolution.

Have you seen this city-country divide affect aid work here?

[Jesuit Services] started in the countryside in 1990, and then we went to Battambang, Banteay Meanchey, Siem Reap and Kampong Thom quite early on. Probably the people who are most articulate in having something to say about the gap between the rich and the poor are some of the city folks, the more educated of the city who are talking about it

through opposition politics or through social networks, like the coalition for housing rights. But among the student population, I don't see that much awareness. To me, they seem to think they've got it pretty good, and they're not going to rock the boat.

What is the history of the Jesuits in Cambodia, and what work do you now do here?

Well, the Jesuits first came here in 1450, but ... the stable Jesuit group has been here since 1990. When we came in, we had three goals. One was to work among people with disabilities. Then we had rural development, and we tried different ways to promote some sort of reconciliation. Eventually, we started a school for people with disabilities at Banteay Preap, about 25 kilometres from Phnom Penh, [which] produced wheelchairs and got deeply involved in the campaign against land mines and cluster bombs. We wanted to address the root causes of disability. The government actually invited us to take in students from Battambang, Banteay Meanchey and Siem Reap, and that meant that we had in the same workshops people from the four different factions. It was a symbolic reconciliation. We didn't harp on it, but we had KR, KPNLF, Funcinpec and the Procheachon party [CPP] working together and making wheelchairs for one another.

I imagine that religious organisations run a fine line between performing charity work and proselytising - of producing "rice Christians". How do you perceive this challenge?

I am absolutely and utterly opposed to that sort of approach. We say in our mission statement that we're here for the people of Cambodia, especially those in greatest need. We've made a definite effort to include on our staff Buddhists and Christians, women and men, refugees and nonrefugees, people with disabilities and those without. We don't proselytise at all. Sometimes people are attracted to [Catholicism] and I'm happy if they are, but we certainly don't have any mass baptisms.

How do you perceive your work as an aid organisation?

You don't have credibility defending human rights or advocating if you don't have some grassroots involvement. I think you need to do the two things simultaneously. Not everybody can do both, but the grassroots will give credibility to the advocacy, and advocacy without grassroots support comes from the sky, and people can make noises about things that don't really affect the lives of the people. So we see ourselves as addressing the needs of people at different levels, at the grassroots, the national level and the international level.

Do you see your role here as permanent?

I see the role of the Catholic Church in Cambodia as permanent. I mean, it has been here since the 1400s. And to keep some international people in the country will act as an umbrella for human rights monitoring, and the whole notion of a global universal society is a good thing. But all our programmes here are run by Cambodian people.

Do you see more people being attracted to the Catholic Church? What role do you see it playing in the future?

I think the Catholic Church here will always be small. Cambodia calls Buddhism the state religion, but to be Cambodian is almost to be Buddhist - the two things are very closely

entwined. But the two basic tenets of Buddhism are compassion and wisdom, and I think compassion is something the Cham [Muslims] at their best and the Christians at their best can unite over. "Loving kindness" we call it, which is the heart of Buddhism, the heart of Christianity and part of the heart of the Islamic tradition.

Based on your experiences, do you think the Khmer Rouge tribunal will offer some sense of closure or reconciliation to Cambodians?

I've gone back and forth on this over the years. Nearly all my staff older than 30 experienced the KR, and they are still traumatised from losing people and losing their own chances for a future. I think the truth has to be told. We can't have impunity. If the trial does allow some things to be written about the KR that haven't been heard before, it will at least put some closure on the past. I honestly don't see in the majority of Cambodian people a great need for revenge against Duch.

In Buddhist conceptions of justice, there is an emphasis on forgiving and forgetting. Do you think Western forms of justice have much of an analogue in Cambodian culture?

Well, many Cambodians will think that these people will come back in their next life in a very bad form. Maha Gosananda, who is a Buddhist I really like, always preached that "hatred never ceases by hatred but by love alone is healed", and that's basically Buddhism at its heart. But a just love would have to have the truth told as well.

INTERVIEW BY SEBASTIAN STRANGIO