

A Story of Reconciliation at a Religious Youth Service Project

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The snail has no hands, the snail has no feet. Gently the snail climbs the tree.
Yoruba Proverb (Nigeria)

One story that illustrates the power of love comes from two of our African participants in a Religious Youth Service project in Italy: Stephen from Ethiopia and Christine from South Africa.

These two unique characters provide a living illustration of the power of love. To get a clear sense of the struggles and attitudes that each person was feeling, it is important to know the political situation of that time.

In the 1980s, South Africa was under the rule of apartheid. Apartheid rule served to force feed a process of depersonalization and dehumanization. People were lumped into categories. The hard work of differentiating one person from another, discovering uniqueness, and encouraging development could be ignored when you simply placed people in categories based on the color of a person's skin.

On a personal level, apartheid ripped and tore the heart, mind, and soul. It did this in a blatant level to Black and Indian South Africans but it also worked on a more subtle way with the white population. Many of the white South Africans were losing their soul little by little as an inevitable result of voicelessly standing by and observing the defenseless being beaten and raped. This was a system that robbed some more than others, but it took from all.

This system faced a growing tide of resistance from the international community. Changes to the government's policy of apartheid developed, and eventually it was outlawed.

Native Americans have a piece of wisdom that is helpful to all who are willing to listen. A Sioux elder once said, "It is important to walk a mile in your brother's moccasins before judging him."

Christine by the accident of birth was born white, a South African, and a woman. Christine grew up and received a good education. She had an interest in world religions and happened to like people of all races and cultures in her quiet, intellectual way. Christine went to Rome hoping to learn about different religions, and in the process she was willing to offer her help working on the construction of a shelter for the homeless.

Also joining the Rome project, living and working in close quarters with Christine, was Samuel. Samuel, by accident or not, was born in Ethiopia. His dark skin and long thin frame was carried with strength and dignity. By faith he was a Copt, an ancient church with deep roots in the early days of Christianity.

Early in our project, at a time when we were just starting to 'check each other out,' Samuel shared what he thought about Christine with some of the volunteers. "I don't care what she does or what she thinks, I will never consider her [Christine] an African. How can she go around saying 'she' is an African?"

Attitude is often a by-product of perception. Perceptions can be wrong. Samuel formed his attitude towards Christine based on the fact she was a white South African, so clearly Christine was one of 'them.'

Our group initially stayed at the home of the Oblate Sisters in an area of Rome where large numbers of North African refugees lived and struggled to meet their daily needs. For five weeks we labored together constructing floors, walls, and the ceiling of a building next to the home of the Sisters. This new building was to provide food, clothing, and bathing facilities to hundreds of street people and those living on the margins.

Both Samuel and Christine worked day after day, moving piles of sand for mixing cement, digging foundations, laying bricks, mixing cement, smoothing surfaces, bending and straining their backs and muscles throughout the workday. The heat from the sun was impartial. It burned intensely on us all. Fair, light, white Christine was one of the quickest to burn.

The tendencies to thirst, ache, sweat, swagger at accomplishments, and push through barriers were daily rituals at the worksite. They gave us common points of reference. Some members of the community more easily pulled together than others. Christine was not one of those. She found herself under the watchful eyes of a number of the participants. She was being studied. Yet, she was laboring like she never had

before. How many well-educated, white South African women spent their days shoveling dirt and mixing cement? Back home, that kind of hard labor was strictly the work of the blacks or the coloreds.

This challenge was hard for Christine both physically and emotionally, for by nature she clearly preferred the library to the construction site. Yet, as time went by she got better at the work and she hung on until the end.

Sleeping, eating, working, talking, and laughing together, our shared experiences over five full weeks did something to each us. We could begin to more strongly identify with one another and take pride in what we as a group had accomplished.

If we had been actors in a drama, the audience would have seen a widely diverse group — racially, ethnically, religiously, educationally, and socially different. In the beginning of the story, there was a stiffness in the actors as they struggled on the set, each not quite knowing how to relate to the other and to the broader story line. In this drama, as time passed, the opening atmosphere of anxious curiosity, uncertainty, and insecurity was gradually transformed. We began to sense the interweaving of our parts and could more easily give impromptu performances that would elicit spontaneous moments of joy.

We were clearly writing our own lines. Since we were acting naturally the sharing became deeper. We set aside the scripts that we had been reading for so many years and offered our new friends pieces of us that no audience had ever been exposed to.

Samuel and Christine had some opportunities to talk and share while they were at the worksite; those occasions increased as we neared the end of the project. We gathered together and shared our stories. Some were deeply meaningful and others were just ripping-roaring hilarious. On the closing day, Samuel, whose tall, lean frame towered over Christine, came close to her. Opening his arms and offering Christine a large embrace he said, “Christine you are my African sister.” These two distinctly different individuals had found a way to recognize that they were simply brother Samuel and sister Christine.