

THE EUCHARIST IN MATHARI VALLEY

In 1986, Fr. Jim Notebaart flew to Nairobi, Kenya, to live and work as a missionary. Years later, he told an audience in the United States about an experience of Eucharist as transformation. Read this story and, on a separate sheet of paper, respond in writing to the questions that follow it. Be prepared to share your responses with the group.

The city of Nairobi is a vast, white, concrete palace, with a big parliament building that's shaped like a flying saucer thirty stories high. But you know you're in a different world because the streets are dusty with mud and you run between cars as you're trying to get across the street.

The *mishanga* boys, the boys that guard your cars, are stopping cars and wiping off the dust from the windshields, and asking for money. It's a tourist country. There are tourist giraffes for sale everywhere. There are tourist baskets, there are tourist bags, there are safaris to go on. But if you go up the road, out of the city a ways, you see a line of trees, really thick, planted by the government. And if you walk behind that line of trees, there's a series of small mud huts, with an alleyway every fifty feet or so. And the alleyways are rutted out by the feet of thousands of people, because behind the trees and behind the huts is Mathari Valley, one of the three huge slums of Nairobi. Sixty thousand people live here—a drainage ditch so dense that when it rains, one cardboard house collapses upon the other upon the other, until they all wash out. The people leave for work before the dawn and go through those little alleys. And at night, as the dusk comes down, their feet are dirty. They have a newspaper with one piece of food wrapped in it for their meal that night, and they wander back into that dark valley.

Well, it was there that the Eucharist is celebrated—in a little space maybe smaller than a typical church sanctuary—one of the holes in this density, with an open sewer flowing right down the middle of it. A table is brought, rickety. A cloth, pristine, white, and ironed. A kerosene lamp. And pretty soon, people begin to gather around. One, two, twenty, fifty, a hundred people, crowded back to back, shining faces in the midst of just that one kerosene lamp.

"*La Jena La Baba, La Mwana, La Roho Matakafu*. In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit" . . . and the liturgy begins. The people start singing, and you can see their forms shift in the shadows. And suddenly, the space in that squalor is filled with song, and clapping, and smiles. And you realize that the pain of the day, and the struggle of the work that the people exert in that horrible place, is somehow lifted. There's an innocence in the people that are able to celebrate, not with pews, but with dirt and sewage and a kerosene lamp. They're able to overcome what's oppressing them. The prostitutes—a lot of the prostitutes of Nairobi are thirteen, fourteen, fifteen years old; they come to the city to work, and there is no work, and they have to live. The *mishanga* boys, who kind of hit you up for money for protecting your car, and if you don't

pay them to protect your car, they break your headlights. There are laborers, people who polish shoes. Every block in Nairobi city, there are shoe polishers and there are hand sewing machines along the way, to get cloth sewn into shirts. Together, in singing God's praise, they're free. And they're free, together as a people, in that darkness.

When I think of "liberation," of "exaltation," of "finding Christ," I think of what happens inside the people. The people are transformed from within. And that's really what was happening there. Never before in my life had I experienced both the squalor and the joy of people who met God. They were immersed for a few moments in heaven—the world as it should be in God. They weren't poor, they weren't prostitutes, they weren't *mishanga* boys—they were children of God.

When the singing ceases, people wander off into their own huts in the darkness. And the priests and others will go into the homes, and there will be maybe a Coca Cola to share—one Coke, twelve or thirteen people. Maybe a small piece of bread that's broken and shared. And then the darkness comes again, and you wander, almost stumbling, up the alley to the road. And the Eucharist is over.

I was drawn by that event, because it was filled with the power of people overcoming their dismal lives. The event remains so strong with me that I wonder why sometimes what I experience seems so safe, so sterile sometimes, so empty sometimes. I begin to ask myself, Why can't I have the sense of freedom that they had in Mathari Valley? Why can't I be transformed with the joy of the singing, and the stars in the sky above, and the dirt beneath my feet? I know I need to be transformed, I do. . . . And I know I want to transform, to bring that touch of the experience, that spark of Mathari Valley, to others. It's a big question for me. Nine thousand miles away, there was so much more joy.

1. Imagine yourself as a member of the Mathari Valley community. Write a one-page letter to the class. Tell about your life and how your celebration of the Eucharist affects you both during and after the celebration. Base your letter on the story, but feel free to use your imagination as well.
2. What do you think are the key elements of the celebration of the Eucharist in Mathari Valley? Why do these elements make the celebration so significant for the valley's people?
3. In what way does this story illustrate key points in the text about the Eucharist?
4. How does the Mathari Valley experience of the Eucharist compare with your own?
5. What lessons could we learn from the people of Mathari Valley that could enrich our own celebration?