

## **Outside the City**

**By Paul-Gordon Chandler**

Living in the Middle East, among the many other benefits, enables my children to experience how others live in more difficult circumstances. Outside the city of Cairo, Egypt (a city now of over 20 million), on the edge of a high rock hill, is a large slum where thousands of garbage collectors live. They go throughout Cairo during the day collecting garbage and then bring it back to this area where they live to sort it to re-sell and recycle—plastics, tins, papers, etc. It is an indescribably filthy area, with pigs walking all around, and the smell almost unbearable in the desert heat. Years ago, Fr. Samaan Ibrahim, a Coptic Orthodox priest, moved into this forsaken place to serve the garbage collectors toward improving their lot. Today, the garbage collectors and their families, many of them are Christians, worship in two massive caves carved out of the rock hill. And they even have a school, a vocational training center and a medical clinic. Amazingly, every Thursday evening up to 13,000 people, the poorest of the poor, gather to worship in the large cave-like amphitheater.

Every time I visit these beautiful people, I am struck by how their spiritual depth overshadows the awful conditions in which live. And I leave feeling that they have touched on something of God that we in the West have often not yet experienced. This spiritual depth is beautiful and thoroughly contagious. They feed me as I am the recipient of their depth of faith.

I was reminded of Jesus' afternoon with the woman outside a city in Samaria in John's Gospel. She was what my Indian friend, Moses Swamidas, a Dalit (formerly called "untouchables") Christian leader calls a "triple untouchable"—being a woman, a Samaritan and a social outcast. Yet, it is to this "triple untouchable" that Jesus revealed one of the greatest of spiritual truths: "God is spirit and God's worshippers must worship in spirit and truth." Over and over again, my personal experience has been that the poor and outcasts of society understand God best, resulting in greater spiritual depth—and perhaps it is simply because they may need God most.

It follows then that one way to enter into that "deeper spiritual dimension" with God, that we must go to the "untouchable" as that is where it is often received—just at Jesus, ate, drank and stayed with the Samaritans and placed such a priority on being with the poor. In fact, John's account of Jesus with the Samaritan women begins, "[Jesus] *had* to go through Samaria." Most Jews walked around Samaria to the east when going north, avoiding it. But as Jesus demonstrated, in order to touch on that spiritual depth, the depth I observe in Cairo's garbage collectors, we must "go through Samaria."

The late Henri Nouwen, the well-known Christian author and Catholic priest, who left his prestigious Ivy League professorship in theology to serve in a center for the handicapped, said it so beautifully; “The great paradox which Scripture reveals to us is that real and total freedom can only be found through downward mobility...The divine way is indeed the downward way.”

The secret of spiritual depth, which most desire and some even crave, is most often found not among the privileged, but rather among what Dr. Lamin Sanneh, professor of history at Yale University, calls the “flotsam and jetsam of society.” These are people who have been to the depths of human experience and have come to faith in God in a way that places them at the very center of God’s restorative work in the world. Because of their status, or rather lack of it, God seems to have a special place for them.

St. Paul says in his letter to the Hebrews, “*And so Jesus also suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy...Let us, then, go to him outside the camp...*” The challenge to us is that it is more often than not, *outside* the gates of the city where we must journey, if we are to enter into that deeper dimension with our Creator. Even outside the city of Cairo.