

Sleeping Sickness – The Franciscan Response

(Extract from *The African Chronicles of Brother Giles*, by The Rev. F. M. Dreves, of St Joseph's Society, Mill Hill, London, 1929)

As in their visits to the many outlying villages round and about the missions the Sisters came into contact with poor sufferers stricken with sleeping sickness, the following article dealing with this scourge will not be out of place here.

At the time of the Sisters' arrival in Uganda the terrible scourge of sleeping sickness was raging throughout the country, but especially in those villages situated on the shores of the immense lake. The following description of a visit to the stricken villages, written in 1908, by one of the Mill Hill missionaries, will speak for itself.

“All along the northern shore off the Victoria Lake are scattered the miserable huts of the sleeping sickness victims. I invite the readers who wish to have a peep at that terrible plague to accompany me in their imagination on a missionary tour which I made a little while ago in those scourged regions. How heartbreaking is such a visit even at the very outset! Where formerly the drums used to be beaten, keeping time with the weird tunes of the flute and native songs whenever a priest arrived at the catechumenate, now a deadly silence prevails. Where formerly hundreds and hundreds of men, women and children came to press round me with their vivacious greetings, now a few sulky faces make their appearance. Small wonder, for the Angel of Death has stretched his black wings over the once joyful village; death in its most unrelenting form – the terrible sleeping sickness.

“After a hasty meal, and carrying baptismal water and the holy oils, I began the most trying and sickening work which ever fell to my share. The patient, for fear of contagion, lives in a small grass hovel, far removed from the inhabited part of the village; and endless are the hovels, one next to another, each containing a poor helpless man or woman next to death's door. Terrible is the atmosphere inside the hut, which is only a few feet in circumference; for there on the floor is stretched a poor human being – without any covering, unable to rise, and consequently unable to go outside from time to time. The atmosphere is simply unbearable, and you will hardly be astonished if I tell you that even with a handkerchief before nose and mouth I had several times to interrupt my sacred functions by a rush outside for a little fresh air. One poor old woman I met in one of the dungeons, half eaten by ants, which swarmed on her body, and the terrible bites of which she was totally unable to prevent, as she could not move herself; another was eating mud and earth, her eyes rolling wildly in their sockets. Good God, what terrible scenes I had to go through! Some could hardly wake up, even by the most energetic pinching and shaking, in order to disperse them, as far as possible, for the fruitful receipt of Baptism and Extreme Unction. Two died in my arms,

weeping for joy, whilst I said the “Go forth, Christian soul”, for their nameless sufferings were at an end in this vale of tears.

“The rest of the population is horror-stricken. One mission station, formerly flourishing amidst a population of several thousands of people, had to be closed, because the almost total population had been wiped out by the scourge, and a second station is in a fair way to follow its example!

“Notwithstanding all efforts in London and Paris, the medical societies have not yet found out an efficacious remedy. In the meantime, of course, we reap an abundant harvest for Heaven, and God alone, knows whether he uses that dreadful means for many as their way of the cross towards their paradise.

“In the affected parts only a dozen or so survive out of a thousand, for, once attacked by the disease, there is no hope of recovery. And how can these few sufficiently attend to the sick, who outnumber them, even apart from the fear of contagion? Still, the living always faithfully supply their sick brothers and sisters with food and water. One long wail, the mourning for their dead, arises from the stricken villages; one long wail arises from Christ’s flock and its pastor: “Save, O Lord, save Thy people!”

A couple of years later, in 1905, another missionary relates:

“The sleeping sickness which has been raging for some years and has taken away many a victim and devastated many a village still wages a dreadful war against mankind out here. For years daily prayers have been offered up by all the Christians; a daily decade has been publicly recited in church to beseech God to remove the awful scourge, to let life return to vast regions where death now reigns; but God in His inscrutable judgment has not thought fit to stay the course of the fell disease. Apparently there is no result in answer to all these prayers. God seems not to hear the supplications of His afflicted children, but in His infinite wisdom he knows what is best for us; may His Holy Will be always done, even though it seems hard to flesh and blood.

“Many of these poor people who would otherwise remain deaf to the voice of the missionary have in their affliction sought with eagerness the saving water of baptism. Truly God scourges to do good! I could relate more than one story in which God’s mercy has undoubtedly been shown in this way.

“Once while visiting a stricken village after a tedious journey in a burning sun I was attacked by fever, and with difficulty made my way to my tent. I was told that I had visited all the sick, so I retired early that night in order to be able to travel betimes next morning. Not quite recovered, I commenced another stage of my journey, and after a long march was so overcome by fever that I fell down on the ground and was soon fast asleep. I do not know how long I spent in that state, but when I awoke the sun was just disappearing below the horizon, I sat up, not knowing where I was, and to my great astonishment I saw five helpless creatures sitting quite close to me. They were victims of the dreadful lethargy. I at once addressed the little band – who, it seemed, had been faithfully waiting my awakening – as kindly as I could, and asked them what they wanted from me. One of them, speaking for the others, replied: “We

have come to hear you speak about God, who created all men and everything, and we desire to be His children; we have been told that a white man has come amongst us and has asked to see all the sick in order to speak to them words of life". Astonished at their good dispositions, I thanked God for His mercy, instructed them in the principles of our holy religion, and, as they were in danger of death, I had no hesitation in baptising them on the spot. Thus five more souls were added to the fold of Christ and, let us hope, to the citizens of heaven.

"Such are the unsearchable ways of God! Had the fever not overtaken me so that I was compelled to drop by the wayside, these five poor souls would never have received the inestimable gift of baptism."