

The Mission

Kirk Leaves the Comforts of Home

By and Based on the Books of Robert J. Cormier (www.thefaithkit.org)
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Kirk Leaves the Comforts of Home

The Idea

In retrospect, it was a natural development. Once Kirk had established himself in the city, he began to wonder about a greater challenge. It was not that he was thinking of leaving the country permanently; he knew he didn't want to leave the country permanently; and he knew that Cynthia didn't either. But he wanted to experience life in a Third World mission, to learn about faith in a different world, and to see whether he would be OK without the comforts of home. (He wanted to see whether he would be OK without what most of the people in the world do not have.) He figured he could afford to be gone for about two weeks. Cynthia was less interested than he; she would stay home and mind Saint Gertrude's.

As was so often the case in church matters, Kirk's first real move was to talk to Father Mike. Father Mike was most supportive. "You couldn't possibly *not* profit from an experience in the Third World," he said; and he had an idea about how to proceed. He would contact his friend, the famous Father Frank, who knew people everywhere. Surely he would know some missionary who would welcome Kirk. Kirk's only stipulation: Even though he spoke only English, he wanted to go where English wasn't spoken. He wanted his experience of the foreign missions to be foreign.

The chain of communications did not take long. Father Frank had a friend, Father Julio, whom he trusted to watch out for a newcomer to the Third World. His parish was rural and isolated. His people lived off the earth, not really dependent on modern technologies or the world economy for their survival. And his territory included certain really primitive areas where people had barely heard of Jesus or his Church.

It was decided. Cynthia would stay home. Father Mike would help out at Saint Gert's. And Kirk was going to Faraweha.

Entry

In almost every case, one enters the Third World through the one really big city in the country, a place which is almost always the capital of the country and called simply “the capital,” or called by the name of the country.

In almost every case, this city has an airport that wants to be modern, a process of passport control that looks grim and pointless, and a throng of people waiting for the passengers of every plane. Kirk was happy that he was quickly spotted by Father Julio. It hadn't been that hard; no one else on that plane looked like Kirk.

“Thank you so much for being here,” said Kirk, “and thank you for letting me come.”

“I'm happy you came,” said Father Julio, “I'm happy you're interested in our life here, and I'm happy for the visit. Do you feel up to making the trip to my village today?”

“Whatever you say,” said Kirk.

Off they went.

Since the road to the village was on the other side of the city, Kirk would get to see the city. The main road was paved; the side “streets” were not.

The city was a sea of people, most of them walking, some of them begging, many supine. Even though Kirk was accustomed to the variety of faces one sees in a city back home, here the faces were *really* different from his, and to him a little scary.

Almost as numerous as the people were the simple and poor storefronts. They were up and down every street, as far as the eye could see. Most were loaded with what seemed to be the same cheap merchandise. Much of it was out-of-doors on stands. “Every morning they set this up,” thought Kirk, and then he asked Father Julio, “how can they all make money?”

“Nobody really knows.”

“And how do all these people buy gas?” Kirk had begun to notice the number of cars. All were small, most were old, and some were spewing smoke.

“Good question.”

The trip continued. Most of the buildings were plain cement structures which appeared to be apartments. (“How many people live in there?” Kirk wondered to himself.) From time to time there appeared a somewhat modern building, which always looked out of place, and in one place there was quite a grand palace, which Father Julio pointed out and called “The Grand Palace.” Too bad animals had eaten most of the lawn.

Now Kirk was beginning to notice the many signs and posters he could not read, except for the ones that were advertising something American. These did *not* help him to feel at home.

The sounds were mostly automobile and bus noises, except for people hawking things. Occasionally, in the background, there was recorded local music; and from what he could hear, Kirk did not like it.

It was hot.

Kirk was relieved when the city began to thin out, though he was not gladdened to see the shanty towns past which they were now passing. These were dirty, and there was smoke almost everywhere, and it was not at all clear that there was any plumbing.

At this point, it was possible to pay more attention to individual faces, which always paid attention to him if they were looking in his direction, and otherwise looked bored if they were not.

All along the road—which was paved but in bad condition—there were many people walking; most were carrying things; and many were children also carrying things.

They passed through many “towns,” i.e., a place in the road where there were one-floor buildings on both sides; and in most towns there was a

side “street” or two. After a couple of hours of this, Kirk felt that there was a sad sort of sameness about these towns.

At one point, in one town, Father Julio turned right onto what to Kirk looked like two dirt trails—one for the wheels on either side of the car—and now they began to go up. There were no more towns, and apart from an isolated hut on a hill, there were no signs of people. The vegetation got thicker. There were no animals to see, but Kirk suspected there were many bugs. They continued climbing for quite some time. Father Julio pointed out some quite un-level fields and explained that this was the extent of most families’ farm. “They live on what they grow,” he said, “and, if it’s a good year and they have something left over, they sell it.”

“And if it’s not a good year?”

“They eat less.”

“Do they work every day?”

“Every day.”

“What do they do?”

“That’s a good question,” said Father Julio. “When it’s time for planting and harvest, they have too much to do. In between, there isn’t that much that they need to do—but they go out every day anyway. And, the women really work. They have the kids. They make the food from raw materials. They wash by pounding. And they are always carrying water.”

Now, Kirk noticed, they were coming upon some sort of clearing. There were a few more huts and one rather big one with a cross on it. This, it turned out, was the church and the home of Father Julio. They had arrived at his village.

The huts were houses, one room houses. Smoke was rising from several.

Father Julio’s house was not so bad as Kirk had feared when first he saw it. It was kind of touching, Kirk thought, to see how this modern person was trying to keep a little civilization in his life with a real table, a window

with curtains, and some pictures on the walls (though the pictures themselves looked quite primitive). Father Julio even had glasses made of glass!

Father Julio showed Kirk a room with an old but real bed, and a bathroom where a little work could get you a little shower.

“Would you like something to drink?” he asked. “Would you like to take a rest?” “Or would you like to walk around?”

Kirk took the drink and the walk.

Immediately on leaving the house, they began to meet people. Kirk understood nothing of the language, but the situations were pretty clear and so were the smiles. People smiled at Kirk and they thought it was funny that he could not understand them. Otherwise they talked to Father Julio about who was sick at home, or some upcoming meeting, or something else like that. Kirk could not help but feeling that their thoughts and their lives were pretty small—but he kept this to himself.

It was getting dark and Father Julio suggested that it was time to go “home.” With the light from a lantern, He made what to Kirk was a very simple supper—to Father Julio it was something special—and after supper they just sat with a local tea.

First Night

“So,” said Father Julio, “how is it going? How do you feel?”

“I’m OK,” said Kirk. “It’s a lot to take in—but I’m trying!”

“How is it like what you expected; and how is it different?”

“Wow,” replied Kirk, “I think it’s mostly different. I never expected this kind of poverty and primitive living, and, even now, I can’t really imagine what it must be like to have their lives and live in the houses.”

“I think that once you get to know them, you’ll find that they’re not really that different from you.”

“Really?” Kirk responded, and then, after a moment, “I’m sorry to say this, but it’s hard for me to see that they are even capable of faith.”

Having said this out loud, Kirk was relieved to see Father Julio smile.

“I understand what you’re saying, Kirk, but they *are* capable of faith. Many are capable of a deep and unshakeable faith. (I say this because many things happen here that can shake a person’s faith.) And I say this not because of some theory that says ‘it must be true.’ I say it because I have experienced it over and over, in conversations and in actions. They are capable of faith—especially in the basics.”

“Can they read?”

“Most don’t; that’s why I use the doctrine pictures.” Now Father Julio pointed to the pictures Kirk had noticed earlier. “That one is heaven.¹ That’s love.² There’s God’s Plan.³ And there’s the doctrine ‘we were meant to be family.’⁴ I got them from the internet and they make sense to people—except people who have never seen a letter or a stamp!”

Father Julio went on. “They have no problem with the idea that God would send a ‘son.’ They certainly get the idea that *they* are God’s children, and from there it’s not hard to think of one special son having a special mission.”

“Of course the cross makes sense to them. Death is on the table the moment a baby is born. And, given the history here, it’s perfectly easy to understand the idea that it is great love NOT to run and to end up executed.”

“What did doing that prove?” asked Kirk. “I mean, what do they think it proved.”

¹ <http://www.thefaithkit.org/stms/FaithKit/FK/doctrineHeaven.htm>

² <http://www.thefaithkit.org/stms/FaithKit/FK/doctrineLove.htm>

³ <http://www.thefaithkit.org/stms/FaithKit/FK/doctrineGodsPlan.htm>

⁴ <http://www.thefaithkit.org/stms/FaithKit/FK/doctrineFamily.htm>

“That somebody really important loves them, loves them enough to die so they could know the truth.”

“Wow,” said Kirk.

Father Julio continued. “Seeing love in someone who doesn’t run... this makes sense of Mass. I don’t think many people could explain to you how they are receiving the ‘body of Christ’—how many of your parishioners could explain it?—but they do get the idea that they are receiving God’s love in the form of food for their spirits. I think it is a basic human instinct to understand this, and to want it.”

“They have an even easier time,” said Father Julio, “with the story of the life of Jesus... born poor, suffering physically, treated like garbage....”

“OK, this is another question,” said Kirk. “When they hear that they are called to love, what do they think? I mean, it seems to me that everything they do is really geared to survival.”

“True enough,” said Father Julio. “But survival often requires sharing, and that’s sacrifice, and that’s never easy, though I think it might be a little easier here because they are so unspoiled and understand so easily that we are in this together. (There is not one house out there that was not built with the help of everyone.) Besides this, they are people. They can be respectful—or not. Get hurt and forgive—or not. And they have to deal kindly the same kind of problems in their houses, with their families, that your people have in theirs.”

“Well,” said Kirk, “speaking of families... Their families seem pretty big, and they live in one room houses. I mean... where do the babies come from.”

“Nobody knows.” Father Julio made clear that he had never looked into this question.

“Just the numbers alone.” Kirk was changing the subject. “Especially the crowds we saw in the city. I’m not sure what I want to say... but I don’t think I’ve ever had a harder time imagining that in heaven all God’s people are going to be one big family.”

“Remember, Kirk, this idea has always stretched our imagination. We believe it because it must be true if God has made us with the ability to love any person we ever get know, and we are going to a place with infinite time and space. Until we get there, we are supposed to picture it in terms we can deal with. For them, it’s quite easy. They *do* know everyone in this village. My guess is that you are having a hard time because you have seen too many strange people in too short a time.”

“Can I ask one more question?”

“I am hoping you will ask me many more questions.”

“You are here, alone, working with these simple people in one village in a big country where the Church has a million miles to go... don’t you feel that what you’re doing is a little futile?”

“Wow,” said Father Julio, “that’s quite a question. But it’s a good one, and I think I have a good answer. First of all, I would never say that I feel alone here. These people are family to me, and God is no less here than He is where you live. I know my ‘field’ is small, but working it—because these people matter—is a huge exercise of my faith; and I’m not sure what I could possibly do that would make me grow more. (Isn’t that my main job here on earth?) As for the million miles we still have to go... a million years from now—or maybe less—they will thank us for what we did to get things started. You see, as far as I am concerned, being here is a big deal service to the present and the future, and that’s what life is for.”

“Wow.”

It was Father Julio’s turn to change the subject. “I am a little busy tomorrow, with meetings that you could not follow and would certainly bore you. I was thinking that you might like to go farther out into the high country and give a talk to some very open but completely unformed people. I have someone who can go with you and translate. What do you think?”

“I think it sounds scary but I’ll do it!”

“Good,” said Father Julio, “they’ve been expecting you for months. I hope you can drive the jeep.”

“Mime”: a play without words

Narrator: Kirk never expected this opportunity. Though he was, in fact, a deacon, and not a bad speaker, he did not speak the language of the mission he was visiting, and he had not imagined that a local person would be able to translate for him. But there was such a person; and there was an isolated village that had had almost no contact with the Church, not ever.

Unfortunately, on the morning he was to go, Kirk’s translator woke up sick. He would not be able to go. The real problem was that people would be waiting for Kirk, and there was no way to let them know something had gone wrong. It was decided that Kirk would go anyway, driving the jeep, and bring someone else with him who could explain to the people what had happened. It was almost a four hour drive. Since he could not speak to his companion, Kirk had time to think. He came up with a plan.

Upon their arrival, Kirk’s companion called the people together and explained what had happened. Amidst the head shaking and expressions of disappointment, Kirk went into action.

(The following lines are instructions not to be read out loud as part of this play.)

First, using both hands, Kirk got the people into a semi-circle, and then got them to sit down.

Then, touching his heart, he gestured toward the people as a sign of affection and even of love.

Next he pointed to the sky, touched his heart again, and then pointed at them. This was supposed to give them the idea that God, too, loves them.

Now, with gestures that were supposed to suggest fashioning, he went to (or picked up) various things, alternately pointing up, trying to communicate the idea of creation. This seemed to be working.

Then he went to one particular person, and with similar gestures of fashioning, he tried again to suggest creation. Then he took a step back and, with an attempt to project joy, tried to show that he was well pleased with what he had made.

Then he did this again with another person; and then one more.

Now, using his hand in a circular gesture that was meant to suggest inclusion, he again pointed up in the attempt to indicate that God wanted all of them with Him where He is.

He then waved his hand in order to indicate that the place is far away.

Returning to his gesture of inclusion, he now indicated that we must go toward God—together.

Now Kirk “asked” for a volunteer with whom he then pretended to walk in the direction of God. After a couple of steps he pretended to stumble, and the other person quite instinctively helped him go on. He responded with an embrace that (he hoped) would indicate gratitude. A couple of steps farther and he pretended to find an apple in a tree. He cleaned this apple and gave it the other person. A couple of steps later he bumped into this person and followed this with his hands together in a gesture of asking for mercy.

After bidding his volunteer to sit back down, Kirk again pointed to another person and, with two fingers, made a motion that was meant to indicate walking. He then pointed to his hand and then to the sky in a gesture that was meant to suggest that this person’s walk of life was in God’s hands. Then, with something of a back and forth motion that was meant to suggest the twists and turns in a person’s life, he walked his hand upward in the direction of heaven. He did this again with another person, but along a different path. Then he did it a third time.

Now, standing still for a moment, trying to indicate a change of topic, he tried to show himself as a strong presumably young man. Then, with the circular motion his arm, he tried to indicate the passage of time. As he did this he began to stoop, trying to indicate aging. Then he laid down and ostensibly died. Quickly thereafter he sat up, stood up, looked around, and showed wonderment. Then pointed—not upward—toward God, and embraced Him.

Now, looking up again, He began to say the Our Father the only way he could—in English.

(At this point, the people of the village also stand up and begin to pray something in their own language.)

Epilog

For Kirk, the people were great, the experience was wonderful, and the food was terrible. He ate what he could, gestured with his watch, and then he and his quiet guide were off. It was already a little late to begin their return.

Things went smoothly until about half-way through the four hour trip. Then, for no apparent reason, the engine went out.

Kirk knew a little about cars, but none of what he tried helped.

It was getting darker.

Kirk was beginning to get nervous when he spotted someone coming toward him on foot. It was a man carrying things; he had somewhere to go. Nonetheless, he stopped, and inquired of Kirk's guide what had happened. This man, it seemed, knew a little about cars and soon enough he saw that the distributor cap was cracked. There was nothing to be done about that now.

Unbeknownst to Kirk, this man, whose name turned out to be Anon, invited them to his home, which was back in the direction from which he had come. Together with sounds and gestures (these men also pointed up—toward the setting sun!) they got their message across to Kirk. Knowing he had no choice, he went.

After about a half-hour they arrived at the home of Anon. After making explanations to his wife, the whole family went to work. There was a chair to be cleaned, a drink to be found, a bed to be made. Anon's brother was sent off to get a new distributor cap. Kirk had no money and this made no difference.

The fire was beautiful that night. Somehow the food was better. And Kirk learned more than he ever expected.