

Fr Christopher Hartley brings hope in a time of hunger

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Amid the chaos of the catastrophic drought on the Horn of Africa, one missionary resolutely holds the fort on the border between Somalia and Ethiopia. He brings aid to the seemingly lost refugee camps in the inhospitable Ogaden Desert.

Sand and scrubland as far as the eye can see. Sixteen kilometres from the border between Somalia and Ethiopia lies Godere. Once a proud fort stood here to protect Ethiopia from attacks from the west. Nothing now remains but ruins and a small village of branches and dried leaves that defies the blistering heat and blinding sand flurries. It is incredible that anyone can survive in such conditions.

Ever since the drought in this region began to claim more and more lives, the small number of families that brave the desert in Godere has been joined by others: more than 2,000 families, nearly 12,000 people, have literally set up camp around the fort: in tents consisting of a few branches with their own clothes draped over them. They come from Somalia and Ethiopia, many of them families of nomads whose livestock has fallen victim to the drought; others are farmers who can no longer wrest any food from the desert soil.

Without supplies of basic foodstuffs from outside, Godere would have been transformed into a graveyard in a matter of days. "Before the first emergency supplies arrived," says Goge, the village elder, "at least three people died every day." Goge's hut of dried bundles of vegetation and plastic sheeting stands behind the old fort. He helps the small number of aid organisations that have found their way to this refugee camp to coordinate their work: how many men, women and children are there? How many new arrivals? Every day, up to ninety people reach this emergency camp, sometimes three times as many. They have no water, barely any clothing, no shoes, no food, no prospects.

Apart from the round tents, there is no shade. Sand is constantly whipped up into flurries that sweep over the makeshift shelters. Hair, eyes and mouth become full of dust which also sticks to the skin. By day the temperature rises to above 40 °C, by night it drops. "We need clothes and shoes," explains Lul, who has been in Godere for three months now with her three children Luc, Ahmed and Nemo. She had nothing to eat, and her home region had become dangerous

because of the al-Shabaab militants. She and her husband decided to leave for Ethiopia, walking through the desert.

Father Christopher Hartley asks Lul what she has had to eat today. "Nothing!" But this evening, in three or four hours' time, she will prepare a broth. There is a little bit left over from the emergency rations that were brought into the camp a month ago. Father Hartley notes her answer in his large notepad. He asks her what kinds of food are in particularly short supply. Lul would like some milk, and she points to her children. Does she know how to prepare powdered milk? Lul nods. But, you see, there is not any here. Hartley adds another note to his list. Then he explains, "Many aid organisations are very reluctant to provide milk because many women use it so they can stop breastfeeding after one month. That way, they can get pregnant again more quickly." This is an important cultural aspect in this region, says Hartley. Children equal wealth. With his black shirt and white collar the priest is an unusual sight in the refugee camp.

Not only here, but also in the next largest town, Gode, where he is establishing his mission station. In this area, more than 90% of the population are Muslims, and the rest belong to the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. Every day at six o'clock in the morning Father Hartley says holy mass. Usually on his own. On Sundays, members of international NGOs and a few Somalis sometimes attend. The Spaniard with English roots has been working as a missionary in Gode for four years.

In days gone by he was a trusted companion of Mother Teresa. Following several years as a parish priest in New York and later in the sugar cane fields of the Dominican Republic, he decided to go to Africa. "I wanted to take Jesus Christ in the Eucharist to those places where the Church was not yet present," says the missionary, "and I wanted to be among the poorest of the poor." That everyone, including the bishop of Harar, who is responsible for him, tried to dissuade him from going to Gode four years ago only served as an extra incentive to Hartley. "I was told that it was impossible to work as a parish priest there. For God, nothing is impossible. And here I am. I live here and say holy mass every day." The next service held in an easterly direction is in India. In between are Somalia and the Indian Ocean.

It is a dangerous area, groups of rebels and al-Shabaab militants fight bloody battles in the vicinity of Gode. NGOs are repeatedly the victims of gangs of bandits.

Father Hartley has never been attacked. "I have a lot of friends among the locals who warn me when things get dangerous." Hartley has a good relationship with the local authorities: he was even given seven hectares of land as a gift. It is here that he is now building his nutrition

centre for children, which doubles as a school. The children receive basic schooling while their parents can attend courses in sewing, mechanics and carpentry. So that they can go to school at all, the children and adolescents are given breakfast and lunch. In this way they are not a burden to their families who are consequently better able to manage without their help with the chores.

In order to help the people here even more effectively, the missionary dreams of bringing the Missionaries of Charity, the order founded by Mother Teresa, to Gode. There would be plenty of room for them here, too: an orphanage and a health post are urgently required.

To begin with, though, four Mother Teresa sisters are moving into the refugee camp in Godere on the missionary's initiative and with the help of Missio in order to offer support to the people there. The next largest town is seventy kilometres away. It can be reached only by jeep, and the route across the desert is dangerous. The NGOs that are already helping in Godere do not stay there overnight. The desert is simply too inhospitable out here. Together with the four sisters, Father Hartley wants to stay there with the refugees and brave the conditions: to protect the sisters and to celebrate the daily mass for them.

"Over there," he says, pointing at a few old brick walls in the middle of the former fort in Godere, "we're going to establish the convent for the sisters. All we need to do is put a roof on it and bring a water tank and a generator here." Father Hartley knows what he is talking about. Together with local partners he has already built a school in this region for four village communities. Friends from Spain helped him with the funds. "Labour is cheap, but building materials are unaffordable," the priest explains. But on the other hand, his idea of bringing the sisters to live here has been met with a great deal of support from the locals. The Missionaries of Charity have been in Ethiopia for thirty years and their work is very much appreciated. Hartley is convinced that the sisters will be important interlocutors for the women refugees in particular.

In addition to this he wants to build a simple construction that can provide shade for several hundred people during the day. He has already noted down the dimensions and the location in his large pad. He also intends to bring teachers here: "There are thousands of children and teenagers here who have nothing to do. We would teach them maths, reading and writing." As he explains his visions for this inhospitable place, a benevolent smile spreads over his face.

"That's what I learned from Mother Teresa: the poor occupy the most important place in the Church. And Jesus wants me to help the poorest of them to really take this place." Then he takes Lul by the hand, who is carrying her youngest son tied to her hip, and gently strokes little

Nemo's forehead. Lul's face, caked in sand, begins to beam. The priest asks her not to lose hope and to stay strong. Today, Lul will not go to bed hungry. But for Father Hartley it is not enough to give people food and medical care: of all people it is the poor who deserve the best treatment. "And," the missionary adds with a twinkle in his eye, "wouldn't it be wonderful if these outcasts were waiting for us at Heaven's gate and were to say, Peter, let that one in, I know him – not only did he help me, but he was a true friend."

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