139. Porridge in the Pot

There is a pithy proverb from Botswana that states simply: ‘Beautiful words don’t put porridge in the pot.’ It brings to my mind other words that I heard many years ago: ‘I was hungry and you formed a group discussion.’ There is a place for discussion but there is also a time for doing. Our Solidarity community in Riimenze are very focused, not so much on putting porridge in the pots of the local people but on helping the people learn the skills and adopt the practices and techniques that put porridge in their own pots.

Learning to harvest and save seed so that one has enough to plant next year’s crop is vital to long-term survival. Knowing how to prepare the ground, what to plant, and how to harvest and store food are skills that the people already possess to some extent but they eagerly learn about new types of food, more efficient techniques and better ways of avoiding hunger. The introduction of pigs has been a revelation to people in this part of the world. Pork is now a welcome addition to the food supply.

Caritas Austria sponsor the large, sustainable agriculture project in which we employ the Azande people rather than bring in efficient, big farm machinery. The opportunity to work for small wages – a few dollars only per day - is welcomed by the people as it injects money into the local community economy. Oxen and small ‘walking tractors’ have been introduced and simple grinders have been shared out among families to cut down on the laborious pounding of grain and tubers into usable flour. ‘Friends of Riimenze’ in Italy and donors from Germany, the Netherlands and Israel have provided medicine for Sr. Joana’s clinic and material for other activities. With Sr. Josephine’s help, mothers make clothes for their children. So it is in Riimenze that our Solidarity members live among the Azande people, teaching the practical skills required for good hygiene and health care, sewing, food preparation and production and a wide range of farming skills.

The market place works much better when there is some money to spend. Those who grow goods, or make them, can find others to buy them. There is great satisfaction in this. Adults find dignity in being able to provide for their children by their own labour. Some local people have also been assisted to go away to follow specialist courses that can bring new skills into the community. Riimenze, however, can be a dangerous place to live. The death rate, especially from malaria and snake bite, is very high but it is a beautiful place. There is another African proverb that says: ‘Judge not your beauty by the number of people who look at you, but rather by the number of people who smile at you.’ In Riimenze there is now a lot more to smile about. Even the many domesticated animals around our house seem to be smiling – or is that my imagination?

The care of the elderly, the sick and widows, is a special focus for the Solidarity community as well as the conducting of workshops on herbal remedies, healing, peace and reconciliation. Some community members have travelled to distant parts of Western Equatoria to deliver programmes to assist the people. Real plant seeds, as well as the metaphorical ‘seeds’ of peace and reconciliation, are being dispersed from Riimenze through this region of South Sudan. The Solidarity Riimenze community members are themselves an example of unity in diversity: Sr Rosa from Vietnam, Sr Josephine from Kenya and Sr Joana from Myanmar are all Sisters of Notre Dame de Mission. Sr Celine is a member of the Soeurs de Providence from Canada and Br Christian is a Marist Brother from Nigeria. As the psalmist wrote long ago: ‘How good and how pleasant it is to live in unity’. It is a message we would like to spread to all of South Sudan. Be ‘doers’ not ‘talkers’, and help others fill their pots with porridge.

– Br Bill