Fr. Arkangelo Louis Sijn, Wau Diocese, South Sudan

Fr. Arkangelo recalls with deep sadness the atrocities committed in Wau during the conflict and he points out to some mass graves, in the compound of the Pastoral Liturgical Catechetical Centre of the Wau Diocese that are surrounded by tarpaulin tents set up by the internally displaced people most of whom have been living on the compound for almost 3.5 years.

“So much happened at that time. For a long time now, there have been many people living on the compound. Some have had to put their tents on top of the graves. A few relatives got to know that their person was buried here and so they came to put the crosses.”

There is an extremely great need for pastoral work to be intensified in Wau as is the case for many areas of South Sudan. The long running war has greatly hampered accessibility to many areas and therefore priests have not been able to see their congregants for extended periods of time – periods of up to a year. Catechists have had to take up some of the roles of priests so that the church can maintain its presence and service to the people. This also means that even the Blessed Sacrament has not been taken to many Christians for long.
However, the journey of a thousand miles begins with one step and for pastoral work to pick up again, training has to be done for all involved. According to one of the pastoral team members, “In the Christian faith, pastoral work is at the heart of evangelism and without it, then it doesn’t work.”

According to Fr. Arkangelo, in order for training to be done, an analysis of the priorities of pastoral work in the diocese first had to be done. “Formation of Catechists and of Small Christian Communities was seen as the most lacking especially in funding that was needed for the training.”

“To begin with, we received training from Solidarity focusing on project planning, monitoring, evaluation and reporting. The training gave the team the capacity to better evaluate the needs and their priorities; the possible interventions; preparation of a plan of action through project planning; how to directly apply for funds; how to implement and to monitor, all of which also helps to foster transparency with donors. The training was the first time pastoral teams from all dioceses in South Sudan came together at one place.”

“In addition to this, Solidarity facilitated the formation of priests and catechists, training on Small Christian Communities and how to set them up, work with the youth and women plus much more. Many priests have never gone for further study courses. There is a need for priests to be reminded what was learned at the seminary, about the sacrament, canon law and the best way to carry out pastoral activities in the parishes”.

After receiving training, Fr. Arkangelo and his team further trained catechists within the diocese. The Wau diocese has 20 parishes. A total of 340 catechists were trained using also material from Solidarity.

“We put effort in training catechists because priests are very few in each diocese. For example, one diocese can have only 2 priests. Wau Diocese for example is so big that it has 7 states in it. Many priests prefer to be located in the bigger towns. This is especially the case where the communities do not welcome a priest from another tribe. On the other hand, during the conflict, in most cases, the armed groups only allow the catechists to visit certain areas. Catechists are the ones running and supporting the churches. An example is a place called Raja, which is 300 km away from Wau where there is no priest. Catechists had to come for training. Raja is a mainly Catholic community but is receiving little support.”
“There was a booklet that was developed for use during Lent and Advent. It was done by Solidarity, the National Director of Pastoral Services and Wau Diocese PALIKA team for pastoral work. It is distributed to the parishes so that they can pray using the book, meditate and reflect during the Lenten Season and Advent. There was also a booklet to guide on trauma healing. There was also a, pastoral handbook to guide us in our pastoral work.”

THIS STORY IS SIGNIFICANT BECAUSE knowledge was gained, through the training, on how to develop pastoral activities in the diocese, focusing on evangelisation through Catechists, small Christian communities; the youth and the family.

Pastoral work goes hand in hand with projects and so the training on project planning, finding donors, project implementation and reporting further facilitated development of pastoral work in order to revive activities of the church whose efforts have been hampered by the war.

Additionally, the training further brought the dioceses together, something that had not been done before.