79. Among the People

The woman looked very worried. It was 6:30pm on a Saturday evening. I was in our outdoor kitchen – the only kitchen - of our Riimenze house preparing the evening meal when a woman carrying her small child appeared before me. I called Sr Joana who went immediately to her ‘clinic’ to dress the wounds on the hands of this child who had fallen over. Every day, people with a wide variety of maladies come to Joana’s clinic. It is the wet season and many children are suffering the wretched illness of malaria. They seek help from Joana in the tukul that has served as her clinic. Sister Joana will soon be able to welcome patients into a new clinic funded, through the Lasallian Foundation, by a large secondary school and two private donors, in Australia.

A second section of this new building is an education centre for women where they can be assisted to have greater opportunity in a society that traditionally downplays their capabilities and stereotypes their roles. Sr Josephine has been away in Nairobi but will be back later this week. She will find the number of girls participating in the liturgical dancing she started has grown and the costumes she prepared are still in good order. The girls have confidently continued to develop their performance in Josephine’s absence. It is a good sign. Under the guidance of Sr Josephine, practical skills for living such as sewing and knitting can also be acquired.

Our Riimenze seminarian, Dominic, who has sometimes assisted Josephine, departed for the seminary in Juba this week. Before departing, he sought some charcoal from us so that he could iron his clothes (see photos attached). I had never seen such an iron before – all part of the resilience and inventiveness of people living in a natural environment without access to electricity. Sr Joana told me they used such irons in her native Myanmar.

Regretably, in this period of post-independence adjustment, some medicines in South Sudan are in short supply. Joana would like more liquid panadol for the children at present. Joana generally manages to keep her clinic well stocked and makes extensive use of well-tested herbal remedies wherever she can. Like Sr Rosa, who is helping the people develop better crops in family gardens, Joana has learned to communicate with the people in the Azande language and teaches the people to utilise what is available in the local environment. It is a wonderful service to these people. The College leaders of a New Zealand school have raised funds for Sr Rosa, so that she is able to extend compassionate assistance and encouragement to people who will help themselves - if only they are given some assistance in the beginning.

All of the people here in this rural community live in native tukuls – except us, for which circumstance I am grateful. We are not here to pretend we would make it better for the people by living the way they do. No, our attitude is to
help where we can, using the resources we can bring to assist the people gradually to improve their lot. By western standards they may seem very poor but they regularly demonstrate human warmth and dignity, and an ability to enjoy special events as they celebrate life together.

Among these Azande people, the daily rhythm of living is established around water fetching, growing and preparing basic food and endeavouring to enjoy good health in the company of family and friends. Life is what it is, without pretense. If a child needs to be fed, even in Church, then a child is fed and there are many mothers with children in Church! No one is concerned. It is the natural order of life. Small children help nurse even smaller children. Security and a sense of belonging abounds.

Rosa, Joana or Josephine often visit the sick or anyone needing help. Occasionally I have accompanied one of them. They know their way through the confusing, ever-changing bush tracks from family compound to family compound. They are warmly welcomed by these people. Rosa is currently in Vietnam visiting her own ailing mother but the people here continue to tend the gardens. It is a sign of hope that not all collapses when the mentors are absent. We move among a people of growing confidence that there a better future awaits their children.

– Br Bill

Charcoal iron

Dominic and iron
Dominic & Sr Josephine
Family garden
Mother & child
New clinic almost ready
Sr Joana & patient
Sr Joana’s clinic
Sr Joana

Sr Rosa and child

The patient

Waiting for treatment