85. We Can Make a Difference

Enormous resources have been poured into South Sudan since the Comprehensive Peace Agreement was signed in January, 2005. What signs of genuine progress are there among the ordinary people as a result of this? Is there any evidence that there is more opportunity emerging for the people generally?

Some things are very noticeable: more school buildings, more vehicles, more variety of goods, even with the current shortages. But severance from the north has come at a cost. One sister wrote recently: ‘I like Malakal but I liked the old Malakal more’… when there was town power most nights, diesel fuel was relatively cheap, fresh fruit, vegetables and eggs were there in the market and gas was available.

There is no doubt, I believe, that new supply routes will be opened up and that readjustment will occur. I asked a class recently, ‘Was the war worth it?’ There were plenty of responses giving reasons why it was, even from those who lost family members during the war. Among this class of young men and women between the ages of 19 and 30, only 12 out of 32 still enjoyed having their fathers alive.

The mothers of 26 of this class were still living but in most of their families some siblings had also died. The war was directly responsible for the death of many people but indirectly for many more who died from starvation, poor health care and harsh living conditions. Yet the major gain has been continuing peace and a pervading sense of the people now controlling their own destiny.

During this past week I spent a few days with Sr. Pat Murray IVBM, Executive Director, of SSS, visiting the Loreto Secondary School for Girls established just outside of Rumbek in South Sudan. We were most impressed by the standard of English used by the girls and their confidence and poise - young women now looking to the future. The girls spoke openly about how hard it was for them to live with each other when they first arrived at school, coming from different tribal groups with differing customs; but now, as the first graduating group, they feel confident, assured and ambitious.

The three Irish Loreto Sisters leading the staff have developed a well set-up school, by Sudanese standards, but still with many development needs. The Loreto girls are looking at a very different future now that quality schooling is available to them. Among them is an Australian Sudanese girl who has left the rest of her family in Sydney and returned to Sudan to finish her education with the ambition of helping her people. She is not sure when she will next be able to visit her family. She found South Sudan very hard at first but has now re-established herself in the culture of her birth.

What I particularly noticed was that these girls were like girls anywhere, chatting and laughing, conscious of appearance, posing for photographs with flowers – and friends. Many of these, girls who were raised in bush tukuls, now enjoy familiarity with an emerging world of new possibilities. The girls wander in and out of the Sisters’ convent very confidently. They are treated respectfully as valued persons and friends, not just students in a school. I am told it was far from easy, especially at first, with some difficult confrontations leading to some ‘winnowing’ of the first crop of students but what has endured is a very friendly and expanding group of students working hard to benefit from the opportunity offered them.

So I have no doubt committed people make a huge difference. Now that I am teaching in our Catholic Health Training Institute in Wau, I am observing something similar to what is happening at Loreto. Give young people a chance, and guidance, and reap the rewards. Quality can only bloom if opportunity is provided. – Br Bill
Senior girls go swimming

Sr. Pat with Aussie Sudanese

Srs. Anne Mary & Anne with girls

Srs. Orla & Anne with girls

Tough life in South Sudan!