86. Waving a Flag of Hope

The past three weeks have kept me pleasantly busy teaching Ethics, and also English, to thirty-three young women and men who each aspire to become a registered nurse or midwife in South Sudan. They constitute the third group, enrolled from widespread regions of South Sudan, taken into Catholic Health Training Institute (CHTI) in Wau. They come with hope and enthusiasm - and sometimes in need of some healing themselves.

The youngest is 17 and the oldest is 35. The average age of this class of nine young women and twenty-four men is 23.2. Their experiences of life vary greatly. Almost all of them can speak of the death of a parent or siblings in their family. In a society where family ties are very strong, only seven of this class still have living fathers but the mothers of twenty-six of them are still alive. I noted it is common that one or two siblings in each family have died and often more children than that – which is probably statistically inevitable, short-term, in a country where almost one in five children die before the age of five.

The energetic young people coming to the CHTI will provide future healing hands for South Sudan. It is a great struggle for many of them attempting to study in English, only their second or third language after Arabic and their tribal language. Yet they are highly motivated to succeed and appreciative of the opportunity they are receiving – paid for by some sponsor, somewhere, often difficult to find!

South Sudan is a country still emerging from the ravages of war. The smell of death is slowly abating but the hurt will endure for many years yet in the painful memories and experiences of this generation. One very impressive girl, who has lost both parents and all her brothers and sisters, admits to having eaten human flesh. The reality that emerged for these people in the horrific years of war is outside what most of us would ever imagine.

Sr Dorothy Dickson, from New Zealand, currently the CEO of the CHTI, and I met last week with Fr. Biong Kwol Deng, from Agok, only 30 kms from Abyei where fighting still continues sporadically, a disputed region where oil is an abundant resource. Fr Biong wants to send suitable candidates from Abyei/Agok to be trained as nurses and teachers. Fr Biong had spoken briefly to me last year and met recently with Fr Joseph in Juba.

There are thousands of displaced persons in his parish and he is anxious to give them hope for a better future. One could sense his heartfelt emotion as he talked of the needs of his people who have so few opportunities. The once substantial church compound in Abyei has been totally pillaged and destroyed. The added complication is that his parish is now part of the (northern) Sudan Diocese of El Obeid while he, and his parishioners, are South Sudanese. Even determining what country should issue visas driver’ licenses and other official documents to them is somewhat confused and an invitation for potential harassment by officials of one country or the other.

We shall have to find a source of funding to do this but Sr Dorothy will work with Fr Biong to identify suitable candidates for admission to the CHTI as soon as possible and
some of our teacher training team will provide teacher training - initially in the form of intensive English instruction delivered in Agok. Later, some teachers and intending teachers from this region will enroll in our pre-service and in-service programmes. Providing assistance to these people is simply a need too great to ignore.

There is no doubt that there is a rocky road ahead for many in South Sudan but meeting and teaching these enthusiastic young men and women is a privilege. These young people may be standing in the winds of adversity but they are waving great flags of hope. They are determined to bring healing to the wounded people of this land.

– Br Bill
Sr Margaret and class

Supper time

Transport to hospital duty