88. Relishing Ritual

December 8th, Feast of the Immaculate Conception, established a new personal record for me – and, I suspect, many others. Previously the longest continuous time I had been in Church was five and quarter hours in Malakal for the Easter Vigil where there were 400 baptisms and 200 confirmations. This time there were five new priests to be ordained for the diocese of Tombura-Yambio and one deacon for the northern diocese of El Obeid.

The ordination liturgy was celebrated under a huge new roof erected earlier this year. There is no Cathedral in Yambio. My guess is that there would have been more than 2000 people in the shade with others occupying various vantage points outside. A local priest advised us, if we wanted a seat, to arrive at nine for the service scheduled to begin at 10:00am. In fact we arrived at 9:20 and the area was already half full; but we were ushered to front row seats. Fortunately there was plenty of air-flow and we were out of the direct sun. We sat for the next seven hours, along with many others most of whom, as far as I could observe, took neither a meal break nor a toilet break.

There were no indications of impatience - only abundant good humour while some speakers at the end of mass talked at considerable length. Even the children seemed to relish the occasion and most ambled away slowly at the end, not in a rush at all. Many people stayed around and chatted. This was the big event and all were pleased to be part of it. The principal celebrant was a Cardinal from Kenya who several times described himself jocularly as ‘a man of few words’ and then set about proving he wasn’t!

The singing was energetic, the liturgical dancing rhythmic, the air was tinged with incense and an atmosphere of joyful celebration. This was nothing stilted about the ritual. The people were there to enjoy the event. It was easy to become part of the celebration and, in fact, the time taken was not a factor of great concern – even to me.

The Governor was present, along with the speaker of the house of assembly and many ministers and commissioners. It would seem the business of State was put on hold for the day. At a special reception for the Cardinal in the evening, the Governor gave each new priest a gift of a new motorbike to assist each in his future ministry. The Governor himself is a former seminarian and proud of that fact. The Bishop of the Episcopal Church was also present and gave a stirring address to the people that they must help themselves, not wait for others to do things for them. Here the Churches and State openly work closely together and collaborate in setting aligned goals for the good of the people.

In South Sudan there seems to be no notion of Saturday evening masses and on Sundays there are only a couple of masses – always overcrowded. Efficiency and brevity are simply not considerations. Better, that all come together and celebrate, even if one is crowded in or squeezed out! On Sunday, 11th December, the Diocese launched its centenary celebration – under the same roof in Yambio with all the priests of the diocese present. The obvious implication of this way of celebrating the centenary was that this would be the only mass this Sunday in the entire diocese. Anyone not attending would have to be content with a communion service conducted by their local catechists. With
well-established, prayerful ritual – and sometimes lengthy exhortations - the catechists do this very well.

We also had a blessing ritual recently for our new clinic and education centre for women and girls, funded almost totally from Australia by the Lasallian Foundation and generous, private donors. Thank you to all who make our work possible. Those of us in South Sudan are able to help the people simply because we are supported from abroad. Our SSS Rome office does extraordinary work in raising finance from various Government and Church sponsorship agencies. The work here goes well only because there is such a united effort elsewhere as well as close collaboration among those of us here. I get to enjoy the long rituals but someone else pays for it!

- Br Bill
Inside clinic

Mingling afterwards

More of the congregation

New priests and deacon

Ordination rite

Sr. Joana and patients
The choir

Waiting for treatment