

Together in Faith

by Brother Declan Power CFC

When I set out for Africa in 1995 to go to Yambio, South Sudan, I didn't have the great command from Matthew's Gospel (28:19): "Go make disciples of all nations," ringing in my ears. No, I was asked to rehabilitate a secondary school and to be its principal.

Before I arrived in Western Equatoria I did two short courses on inculturation. It wasn't the first time I heard the word but I was very glad that I learnt something of its meaning and especially its application. It refers to the adaptation of the way the Gospel is presented for the specific cultures being evangelised. It was popularised by Pope John Paul's *Redemptoris Missio* (1990), but predates that encyclical. Early practitioners of inculturation include St Patrick in Ireland, St Cyril and Methodius among the Slavic peoples, and Matteo Ricci SJ in China.

The civil war between the predominantly Christian south and the Islamic fundamentalist north was in full swing when I arrived in Sudan that September. It had cost the lives of two million, left millions destitute and millions more in refugee camps in neighbouring countries. However, it was because of the huge suffering inflicted on the people that I was to witness a real ecumenical spirit at work in the Church in South Sudan.

The school that I was to manage consisted of only three large rooms with no furniture. The central room was divided in two to provide an office for the headmaster and a small classroom which doubled as a staffroom. We had very little school materials and only two of the teachers had official qualifications. At first I was daunted by the task ahead but what struck me very forcibly was that the people were very resilient and willing to work together.

There was a great joy in the young people, they were keen to learn but not used to working in a consistent way because the war had often disrupted their schooling. It took me some time also to realise that I was dealing with young people from different faith backgrounds. Some were Catholic, most came from the Episcopal Church of Sudan [ECS], some were animists, while others were Seventh Day Adventists. Being a Christian Brother, I was used to starting every class period with the *Hail Mary* and I continued to do so in Sudan. As I grew to

appreciate their different faith backgrounds I addressed the issue of what might be acceptable for some and offensive or awkward for others. Their response was really an eye-opener for me. They liked to pray and all prayer allowed them to be in communication with God. The respect they had for each other's faith and practice was striking. I cannot recall any big occasion in the Catholic Church or in the ECS when both communities didn't come together. I can still remember the enthusiasm with which they sang, danced and ululated when joining in any religious or semi-religious occasion.

Another challenge

After two years the bishop appointed me development coordinator for the diocese, which was in effect the size of Ireland. There were no roads only dirt tracks, one hospital for TB and leprosy patients, one secondary school, and primary education was in a very sorry state. I encouraged people to do as much as they could for themselves and, where possible, contacted agencies that might support the building of schools or clinics or put in boreholes.

People had great trust in God, especially the women. The Comboni Sisters would organise workshops for women and also invite representatives of other faiths. These workshops would commence with prayer, a reading from the Bible and the singing of hymns. Nearly all the churches shared the same hymns as hymn books were limited and people taught each other their songs. They wanted to acknowledge God as the beginning and end of all their activities.

The Church in South Sudan was dependent on catechists and the Comboni Fathers were very active in preparing catechists to manage the parishes. However, before I left the number of priests had increased and every parish had a priest, thank God.

During my time among the people of South Sudan I really felt the call to be of service. I witnessed this mission exercised by people of different faiths towards one another. They saw themselves as followers of Jesus, their elder brother, and of a Father who cared about what happened to his people. I was privileged to live in a community that understood itself as the People of God.

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