

“I SAW JESUS KNEELING THERE!”



Father Gregor Schmidt is one of the three Comboni Missionaries in charge of the parish of Fangak County, which has the advantage of being, by its geographic situation, relatively sheltered from the South Sudan civil war. Still it does not escape its effects. Its dimension is huge—it has an area of almost 240 000 km²—and the challenges are also big. Fr Gregor loves the Nuer people, and he keeps in his heart almost biblical scenes: “After one arduous journey through deep swamps, a woman washed my legs and feet, and I saw Jesus kneeling there!”

Fr Gregor on a journey to the villages. Besides the pastoral work (teaching the Bible and the catechism and visiting the sick), he is involved in educational activities.

FATHER GREGOR Schmidt is a German Comboni Missionary working in Fangak County, South Sudan, among the Nuer tribe. Many Nuer became Christians when they fled abroad during the two civil wars and have brought the Gospel as lay people to the region since the 1970s. Although the Anglican Church began her work during colonial times and later handed over the mission to the Presbyterian Church, great numbers of Nuer only converted in the 1980s through their Christian relatives who had come back. The Catholics were followed by catechists (local Church leaders) and in the 1990s

they asked their bishop to send priests. The first missionary to arrive was a Comboni Father Antonio Labraca, who opened the parish of Fangak County in 1998. Fr Gregor arrived in 2012.

In spite of the South Sudan's civil war—now going through its seventh ceasefire, signed on the 27 August 2015 as a result of intense international pressure—Fr Gregor likes the place very much: “I am very grateful for living in a pastoralist environment. These people survive with the bare minimum and show us what is really essential in life. Besides that, the Nuer are very hospitable, and they are egalitarian.

Decisions are taken in consensus. If an issue cannot be solved, we wait for months or even years. This is quite an adjustment for the Catholic hierarchic model.” After all, Fangak County has been relatively preserved from the conflict: “Our county (see map below) is like a safe island in the middle of the opposition territory because there are neither roads nor bridges across the Nile to enter with heavy artillery. But the county capital, New Fangak (Phom) lies on the Nile and was taken at the end of November 2014 by the government with the help of militias who launched an attack with ships. Because these

militias have changed sides or moved to other battlefields, the place is again in Nuer hands.”

Of course, Fangak may be somehow protected, but is not immune to the war: “The region depends on the Nile to get supplies. When the conflict broke out, all river transport stopped, and soon the market of Old Fangak ran out of food and other items. The county has received tens of thousands of internally displaced people (IDPs) because it is considered safe, at least until the county capital was attacked. This provoked another internal wave of about 30 000 IDPs southwards. Old Fangak was a village before the conflict, but now it is a small town. The presence of many NGOs and the Red Cross offering emergency relief has changed the attitude of people to deal with scarcity. Every year, people are used to a period of famine, but only during the last two years do they benefit from the United Nations World Food Program. Families have welcomed their relatives with the result that in many households the number of people needing food has doubled. That is a heavy burden. On our site, by the church, there are cats that get the leftovers from lunch. The other day it happened that two children grabbed the cats’ food from a dirty plate because they were hungry.”

THE ETHNIC DIVIDE

At the root of the conflict there is, among other factors, a strong ethnic divide, even if both main rivals are pastoralists: while the Nuer people are 15.6% of the population, living historically in the Upper Nile, the Dinka represent 35.8%. This is just a part of the picture: the new country, founded in 2011, has 60 indigenous ethnic groups and 80 linguistic partitions among a population of around 11 million; it had no tradition of western-like political institutions or, even, of centralised power; the fast urbanisation after the long and devastating secession war from the North didn’t contribute to create a spirit of unity or to form an equally shared kind of government.

Fr Gregor recognises the importance of the ethnic factor: “People here are very proud of being Nuer. The first identity is always the clan and



Fr Alfred from Uganda, Fr Christian from Italy and Fr Gregor, from Germany.

the tribe. I think that for most South Sudanese the ethnic identity is more important than the national identity. Nation states are a new phenomenon in Africa. In the case of South Sudan, it is a miserable service-provider. Therefore, people rely on their traditional social networks. They have never known anything else that provides for their security and wellbeing. The State has only meaning because it allowed South Sudanese to be independent from the Arabs. The people here blame the Dinka-led government for the ethnic cleansing that happened in December 2013 in Juba. Several hundred, but possibly several thousand Nuer were targeted and killed in house-to-house searches during the first week of the conflict. Any atrocity the opposition forces may have committed afterwards is viewed as a response or self-defence to the evil done by the government. All our people support Riek Machar. And although they might accept that he cannot become president, they will never agree to a lasting peace if President Salva Kiir stays in office.”

However, he admits that, perhaps, things are beginning to change: “People try to go ahead with their lives as best as they can. Survival is also a challenge in peaceful times, and if the family wants to eat, someone needs to look after the cattle and dig the fields but there are also several communities that encouraged their youth to go fighting. In some places, there are almost no boys in their teens and early twenties. It is a “patriotic” duty to go to war but after almost two years, we

notice also a certain exhaustion. The initial feeling of revenge has given place to the realisation that victory is not possible. If both sides have this feeling, there is a chance that they agree on a political power-sharing deal.” He does not want to deceive himself, though: “There is a long history of inter-tribal fighting and killing in South Sudan, not only between Dinka and Nuer. This country never had a truly peaceful year since autonomy was granted in 2005. The problem with a modern State is that the people in power cannot strip themselves of the “ethnic logic”. They are so attached to it that it makes them provide first for their relatives and clan members. That which is generally characterised as corruption and nepotism is the way through which the various ethnic groups ensure that their members are being taken care of. If a person with access to money refuses to help his relatives or clan, he is blamed for being disloyal. The preference for one’s own group and the resulting conflicts—that has always been around. This pattern of behaviour continues to be exhibited when one becomes a politician.”

A SACRIFICED GENERATION

A war scenario is not favourable to the education and formation of a new generation. Fangak County is obviously no exception: “Most youth grow up the traditional way without school education. They herd cattle and help in the fields or in the homesteads. Although some have been to a town, most have never seen a car. Old Fangak is the only location in the



One entire generation will be sacrificed by the recent civil war.

In the long run, Church life will be a unifying and pacifying factor in South Sudan. Fortunately, all big Churches in South Sudan speak with one voice regarding reconciliation and peace among the ethnic groups.

county where students can finish primary school. Compared to other regions in South Sudan, we are very underdeveloped. Life in general has been quite peaceful for the young generation since the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement in 2005. They don't need an outside enemy like the Dinka to fight—it is part of their life to clash among clans and also to kill each other occasionally. The last two years were quite traumatic, mostly for those who went to fight and survived. In many villages, youth were encouraged to go. I was shocked to hear that some of our Catholic youth leaders advertised among their peers to go fighting. Even a young catechist took up arms. Many boys dropped out of school."

The tribal traditions make it difficult to know how many child soldiers were involved in the conflict, because what separates a boy from a man is quite subjective: "Child soldiers are, by definition, youth below the age of 18. Among the Nuer, the distinction of under-age has no cultural meaning. As in other traditional cultures, youth are considered adults much earlier. Entering puberty, they learn to hunt and

also to kill. When youth are recruited, people don't ask for the age but look at their body development or if they have received marks on their forehead, and quite a number of youth in the countryside might not even know with certainty their birth year."

On the other hand, the "recruitment" can be quite arbitrary: "During 2014, the opposition forces in our area were satisfied with the numbers of volunteers. As the conflict dragged on, they forced every man who owns an AK-47 (the Kalashnikov) to fight. The other alternative was to give up one's weapon, which is a tough choice to make. When this measure could not provide for enough fighters to replace the fallen ones, we had a massive forced recruitment in the whole county at the beginning of this year. Many homes in the villages were raided by night and youth taken indiscriminately. In Old Fangak, they called the population to the public square and then detained all men. Although most of them (in particular the older ones) were released, the *payam* authorities

announced that they had recruited over a thousand youth in Old Fangak. My estimation for the whole county is over five thousand minors and adults. Then, there was another recruitment where they were looking for soldiers who don't want to fight anymore. For that matter, they detained several hundreds of youth in Old Fangak and checked their identity. It seems to me that the opposition forces claim a right on a person once he has been in their ranks but possibly, the person didn't want to fight on the first occasion either. To prevent soldiers from deserting, there is a regulation that those men are forced to fight for six months at the front line. Currently, I don't see many soldiers around, and people hope that the new peace agreement will hold. There has been a public statement by the authorities about not to engage in skirmishes, unless they are attacked."

FATALISM AND POLYGAMY

In the evangelisation field, a cultural kind of fatalism does not help the missionaries to dissuade the young to fight: "Most youth in the town don't want to be recruited but in the villages, there are many volunteers who see it as an act of self-defence. The Nuer also believe in fate, that God has already decided the day a person dies. If they go to fight, they feel protected by providence." Destruction and suffering are something particularly hard to deal with: "We are strongly affected by the suffering that families undergo because their relatives have been killed. Since we are cut off from the outside world whether there is peace or war, most of our pastoral work continues. Our activities are focused on building relationships and a strong community of faith. When the northern region of the parish was under attack, we could not reach many chapels. New Fangak has been completely destroyed. Not one building is left standing, and even the trees were cut to prevent the returnees finding shade. Still, we are better off than many other places. In order to appreciate this situation, readers should know that work in all other Catholic parishes of our diocese (and probably many Protestant Churches in the wider region) has been suspended, and many have not yet opened again. Our

diocese comprises the three states of Unity, Jonglei and Upper Nile (see map) with an area of almost 240 000 km².”

Even in times of peace, there is another cultural trait hard to eradicate: “Our biggest challenge is to find catechists who lead the chapels. We live in a polygamous environment where over 99% of Christians continue in this lifestyle. The Catholic Church demands that a catechist has to be monogamous (as Protestant pastors have to be). Often, we cannot find even one Catholic in a chapel that is monogamous and knows how to read, and if there is such a person, he might not be a leader.”

Anyhow, in spite of all those obstacles, the missionary work doesn't stop, on the contrary: “Currently, we are three Comboni Missionaries, Fr Christian from Italy, Fr Alfred from Uganda and me, who serve a parish of around 25 000 Catholics spread in about 80 villages. Any place that has a regular number of Catholics praying on Sundays can become a chapel. We missionaries divide and visit these places as best as we can, usually two or three times per year. All journeys are on foot because there are no roads for vehicles in the county. Besides the pastoral work (teaching the Bible and the catechism, visiting the sick), we are involved in educational activities, for example organising the in-service training for about 70 teachers of the county and preparing the primary school students in their last year for the state exams. We also support two Catholic chapels to have their village primary school because the government is not present in many places. Besides, we have our prayer life with a daily Mass and psalm prayers. The daily work in the Parish Centre in Old Fangak is not that different from a parish in Europe, except that our life is determined by the seasons. We are out on a long journey during the Advent/Christmas season. The next journey to the chapels is in the Lenten season, including the Easter celebration. The catechists and the youth each receive two formation courses during the year. The women have their meeting in December. The people come from far. Some have a two-day journey.”



Old Fangak lies on a tributary of the White Nile called Bahr-el-Zeraf.

Even if surrounded by uncertainty and instability, Fr Gregor finds reasons to be joyful, like the people he serves: “There are so many small things that touch my heart, like the love with which we are welcomed in the villages. The women sometimes have to walk hours to get clean drinking water for us. After one arduous journey through deep swamps, a woman washed my legs and feet, and I saw Jesus kneeling there. I find it often remarkable to witness the baptism of adults who have decided to join the church after a long discernment. Their focus on the transition and their joy during the celebration make God's presence tangible. By the way, people don't get gifts when they receive a sacrament. It is the sacrament itself that is the gift and what makes them joyful.”

Fr Gregor believes that the Churches have a role to play in the healing of the new country. Even if he has no unrealistic expectations about the immediate future of the county and the country, he finds motifs to be hopeful in the long run: “I believe that the presence of the risen Lord changes the perception of who is my friend or enemy. In the long run, Church life will be a unifying and pacifying factor in South Sudan. Fortunately, all big

Churches in South Sudan speak with one voice regarding reconciliation and peace among the ethnic groups. This testimony is very important, and we should continue inviting people to a true conversion of the heart. In Christ, all ethnic and racial barriers are broken down.” It will take a long time until people will be able to see a noticeable difference. The outside world is interested to see if the recent peace agreement will be observed but peace is more than the silence of the weapons. There is a huge distrust on both sides. Ethnic groups can also wait for decades until they take revenge. The 2013 killings of the Nuer by security forces loyal to the president was interpreted as a late revenge of a massacre against Dinka that forces connected to Riek Macher had committed in 1991. This country has also many militia groups that can switch sides at any moment. On 31 August came news of an attack against our county by a group that is connected to the government, but does not agree to the terms of the peace agreement. Interestingly, the local Nuer authorities do not blame the government and play down the incident. It seems that they really want to make this peace agreement work.” ☺