

Mission to a Stumbling Nation Come of Age; Br. Placido (South Sudan)

For the Patrician brothers in Kenya, this is a new experience; especially to me. Everything seems strange; so much is happening but at least I have been introduced to a new kind of experience. Whereas this mission has come of age, a lot of energy has been put to it, therefore, allow me to speak about its preparations; the journey and the welcome I received.

Being born and brought up in a village, not once did I imagine I would be a missionary in a foreign country; although technically speaking I have been one since I joined Patrician Brothers. Born 37 years ago in a small village of Kerian, Ndagani Sub-location, in Tharaka Nithi County, I went to Kitui for my secondary school education. I was young then and had no knowledge missionary work. No idea about culture shock; and no worry about life; what bothered me most that time was home sick. Every day I and my best friend then (*now deceased*) had something to complain about. We used to sit at a certain corner every day after lunch and contemplate about home. Many were times when I sought transfer to other schools near home but it never worked; and out of frustrations, I resolved to pretend all was well. Call it pretence because I said so but it was a kind of adaptation mechanism.

When I was still a form one (*mono as they used to call us*) I remember one time a day before the schools closed all the students from my part of the country decided to go home earlier. We were just form ones and we followed the instructions of our elder brothers; the form twos. Form twos in many school are known to be the most notorious, most undisciplined, most cruel....name all the vices (*this may not be true all over but it is a fact in Kenya*). When they said we go, we just followed. From the school to town, it was about four kilometres. There is no shortcut because the road is straight.

Very early in the morning we left the school and walked towards town. We were few metres to the bus station when we heard the sound of a familiar motorbike. It was our head teacher's motorbike. Where we were, there was no hiding place. He saw us, recognised every one and asked us where we were going. It was obvious because everyone had a bag, and some of us had their school boxes. We told him where we were going and to our astonishment, he approved our going but on condition that we do not return to that school. He went ahead of us, and we followed although scared. There was no turning back! That was a mere threat, because we were not the only ones who had escaped.

Slowly, the holiday was over and we were back to school for the second term. All the escapees of the previous term were lined up. The headmaster was a good man. He understood well plight of the form ones and therefore he wanted to forgive us....but not without a form of penalty. We were asked to slash grass in the playing field half a day. We did and later we were warned against taking French leave.

That experience taught me many things;

- Patience
- Obedience
- New adaptation

- Coping mechanisms of living away from home
- Choosing friends

From high school in a foreign land, I joined a congregation in a foreign land and today, I am a missionary in a foreign land (country).

Kitui was warm, Juba is hot, Wau is melting. Although I did not carry my very heavy clothes, what I carried is proving useless. I come from a cold environment and what I have known all my life is coldness. Meru can be cold sometimes especial in the months of June, July and part of August.

Community Living

Talk of the definition of the word solidarity, and Juba community will define it for you speechlessly. The Solidarity communities are really united. I have not seen their kind anywhere else. For instance, the Juba community is an international community with members from all over; Pilipino, Canadian, Irish, Bangladesh, name them same case applies to Wau.

Everything is done communally; members do the cooking together, they wash together, pray together, etc. for the priests in the community, only one priest celebrate mass per day. You may not tell who a priest is except during mass. During lunch, all the members including the cook sit at table and take their lunch discussing day's events. There is an element of equality.

The day I arrived in Juba, there was a gathering of more than ten young men. By appearance they seemed well, may be working in big offices in Juba. With them, and chairing the meeting was a de-la-salle brother (Br. Michel) from France. I could not understand any of their discussions because they were speaking in Arabic. I was later informed that those were ex-street boys from Khartoum. Bro. Michel helped them and now they are working in government ministries. As a gratitude for what they received, they are beginning an organization which will help the street boys in Juba. Juba alone has over 3,000 street boys and it is a pity nobody is taking care of them.

They say you cannot eat a crab unnoticed, immediately after the meeting, Br. Michel learnt that I had been working in a street boys centre. He developed interest in me and we had a discussion about street children and how we were rehabilitating them. His English is very poor and although I could not follow his discussion well, at least he wanted to know about networking aspect. Am told in Wau there are thousands and thousands of them, and the SSS pastoral co-ordinator wants something done for them. The question is; what will Placido be doing in SS? Time will tell because, if I speculate or plunge myself in everything, I will end up burning out. I have passion for many things, but not as I have been presented. I have a feeling that the CL sold me very highly and now it is my turn to prove him right or disapprove him.

I know am joining the Solidarity to work as a financial administrator, but the need for pastoral work is high. For the two days I walked through Juba, that need became very clear to me. There are so many street families, the kind I have not seen in Nairobi. I felt touched and wondered whether there was anybody taking care of that. We also came across a lepers'

community. They live as one big family. The sister who has been my director explained to me that these lepers had been in the hospital and when they got better; they were released but had nowhere to go.

Talk of leprosy, and I would say that it is not a reality because I have heard of it in the Bible only where Jesus used to heal them. But now in Sudan, I have seen them although not as patients. We went to river Nile and wow! It was amazing to see this river of the good books. The good books say, *“the river Nile turned into blood....”* So, we are not too far from the kingdom of God. It is one of the major modes of transport to the north. In case there is air transport strike by the time Br. Tom joins us in S. Sudan, the only mode of transport he can use at this time of the year is water transport and that will be through river Nile. This is because, in between Juba and Markal where he is going to work there is a big swamp and no vehicle can go through. He will be more to the border with the north than I will be.

I do not want to compare Juba town with any of the towns in Kenya because by doing so I will be underrating the potentialities of this young nation. However, it took me less than two hours to go through it. It is a bit disorganised and to my surprise people are exchanging money on the road side; a thing I found very peculiar.

In the heart of Juba, I found “my studio”. This was very amazing to me. Do not ask me who owns it and in case you come to Juba, do not get excited about it. Nevertheless, I felt excited and more at home to see that, someone else shares my name. It is not common you know.



Ecumenism

Conflict is one of the best ways of bringing people together. Sometimes it is for convenient purposes; may be if the united parties are out to fight a common enemy. I found this element common in South Sudan. Churches are so united that, the Ethiopian Orthodox church shares the chapel with the Catholic Church. Every Sunday from 6.00 am to 10.00 am the Ethiopian Orthodox church occupies St. Michael's chapel and from there the Catholic Church come in for their mass. Come to think of it....somewhere in one of our busy churches in the city centre, the 2nd mass group waiting for the 1st mass group to come out of the church for them to enter. That is what happens in this particular church. I was also told that, there is good collaboration between the ecumenical church and the Catholic Church here. There is good reason for this, but this is a story of another day.

Wau

Wow! Wau is a place to be. It is about 600km from Juba. This is where I am based and hope to be for the next few years if all goes well. I am based in a Catholic Health Training Institute. The concept I had when I was first told am coming here was that, I would be

working in a hospital. However, there is no hospital here; it is only a training institute. It is quite huge as you can see from the picture¹

There are about seventy students in the institute and by the end of this year; the first batch of students will graduate. The students are good and very friendly. My interaction with them will be minimal because I am not a teacher. I will be working as a financial administrator. Students are given a monthly allowance for their pocket money; therefore, I will be meeting them when they come for their “boom”. Nevertheless, I hope to be involved in kind of pastoral work with the students. Somehow, the students are happy to have me around because; other members of the community are sisters all except one being from outside Africa. There is one priest in the community who is the administrator. He is overwhelmed by so much work and I am here to relieve him some duties.

The first day here was spent on my job orientation and introduction of Wau town. This town is the second biggest in SS but again, I do not want to compare it with any of the towns in Kenya. Also I do not want to think about it so much because it is not very far from the border with the north. It has an “airport” which is now closed but they say it will be open by 9th July; during the independence commemoration. Wow! I will be in *Wau* for the first birthday celebration of this youngest nation of Africa. It is quite young and it requires a lot of support.

Near the airport is the UNIHAS camp. There are so many peace keeping forces; majority being from Kenya. Every fortnight the NGO representatives working in this area go for security briefing and my first duty was to accompany the administrator; I being his assistant to this security briefing. We have to be alert you know, and us being in an institution like this we need to be more vigilant. Near this big camp, the Sudanese army have their camp with their war gears. Their tankers and machine guns look miserable and I wonder what they can do in case of an attack. I hate the sight of these machines but this is what you have to live with here. At least the S. Sudanese people are breathing some air of piece but not fully.

The country is very poor on infrastructure, and road network is poor. Except in towns, there is no tarmac in the countryside. Movement from place to place is mostly by air, whose transport services are offered by UN. No investors are ready to come to SS yet because they are scared.

As part of my orientation, I went to the bank to be shown how to withdraw money and those other bank services. What I saw scared me. People carry money in paper bags to come and deposit. You can't queue with the money because it is too much, so you place it in a line and then you sit and wait for your turn. I met some Kenyans in the bank and we made fun of it that, we saw this kind of system in coffee factories or in a posho mill when we were young when we used to be sent by our mothers to deliver coffee of grind *unga for ugali*. The point I am passing across is that, there are so many bank notes circulating and so, people have a lot of money which is valueless. A dollar is exchanging at 3.8ssp, but a soda is 4ssp. People are very poor; but lazy. This will be a story for another day.

¹ Picture

In a nutshell, SS is a country which needs a lot of support. I am happy that, the congregation found it worthy to send some of its members for this mission despite the needs in their various regions and provinces. If I continue writing, I will write and write....you see, I haven't put any reflection on this article. But, I promise to keep you updated with what I am observing here daily, and also posting reflections to you often. I enjoy writing and I pray that you will enjoy my reading.