

190. We Are The Church

As I write, the Pope has called together almost 200 Church leaders to consider what he calls *'the scourge of child abuse by clerics'*. Yes, child abuse requires strong action but sometimes media attention to this 'scourge' seems to me to be out of all proportion to the Church I know and the service it delivers. That child abuse should have no place in the Church goes without saying and it an obvious necessity to develop preventative protocols and procedures; but it is wrong to judge any profession by its worst aberrations as many in the media seem to do.

Recently, I was at the table with three other seventy-five year old Solidarity members. I have been in South Sudan for nearly ten years but I found myself thinking that I may be the oldest of this group but I am the 'baby missionary' among them. We were celebrating the birthday of Maryknoll priest, Fr Tom Tiscornia, from the USA. He has spent most of his life in various African missions and is fluent in both Arabic and Swahili, the most widely-spoken languages in this part of the world. Another Solidarity member from the US, Sr Annette St Armour IHM, a catechetical expert, has just completed five years in South Sudan after more than 30 years as a missionary in South Africa. The third member of this group of seventy-five year olds, Sr Barbara Paleczny SSND, is from Canada. She has two Doctorates, has written many books and leads In-service teacher training programmes as well as training others to give trauma healing workshops. She has been here more than ten years but has also worked in South American missions as well as other places where her many talents can be utilised. Me, I cook and coordinate: I am good at getting others to work! I assert that we, and many others, are the real Church. There are almost five hundred missionaries in South Sudan coming from many different countries welcomed by the people who appreciate the services we deliver and the gospel message that we bring.

Among our Solidarity members, Sr Dorothy Dickson from New Zealand is an RNDM Sister who has also spent more than 30 years in some of the most remote place places in Africa. She learned to communicate in French and Arabic as the situation required. Her fellow RNDM Sister from NZ, Margaret Scott, has been the principal of our Solidarity Teacher Training College in Yambio since it began. Before that she was a missionary to the aboriginal people in the Kimberly region of Australia. Two other RNDM Sisters, Josephine Murugi from Kenya and Rosa Le Thi Bong from Vietnam, have also been here in South Sudan for more than ten years. They are the Church. Years ago, I knew their congregations as one running the schools, Sacred Heart Oakleigh in Melbourne, Australia, and Sacred Heart Girls School in New Plymouth NZ. They no longer do so, having handed those schools on to well qualified lay persons, but they are making a vital contribution here in South Sudan - and in many other places.

Here, in South Sudan, I know many Edmund Rice Christian Brothers. They were very strong in Australia but made the courageous decision to move out of the leadership of most of their Australian schools and open communities and ministries in Africa. They now have a significant young group of African Brothers developing the African missions the missionaries started. The Church is very much alive in Africa. The Irish province of the Loreto Sisters opened a secondary boarding school in Rumbek ten years ago. It has now grown to cater for 300 girl boarders. They also run a primary school for approximately 600 boys and girls. My own congregation, the De La Salle Christian Brothers, began a secondary school for boys last year with 26 boys in Senior One. All completed Senior One and by the end of the year all but three were taller than me! News of good education spreads. Eight days ago on enrolment day, there were more than 400 applicants for 100 places in Loreto and 182 for 40 places at La Salle Secondary. These schools would not exist were it not the for the zeal of the Religious congregations. Nor would they exist without the generous support of donors in distant countries. This is the Church fulfilling its mission. It is good to be part of it. – Br Bill