

AMONG THE NUER: A MINISTERIAL CHURCH FOUNDED BY CATECHISTS

For 25 years hundreds of lay catechists have evangelized the rural areas of the Nuer territory (South Sudan) without the support of missionaries or ecclesial institutions. They have founded hundreds of self-sufficient Catholic communities from the economic, ministerial and missionary point of view. The Nuer territory is very vast and marshy, yet most of the mission trips were made on foot. They have challenged many obstacles in their missionary efforts:

1. The new Nuer territory is very large and marshy, yet the vast majority of the missionary trips were made on foot.
2. The war has put them in constant danger, in fact our parish has 16 martyr catechists: 6 during the war of independence (1983-2005), 10 during the first civil war in South Sudan (2013-2018), including two youth workers and a seminarian.
3. Some lived in captivity because the Nuer territory was considered a "Protestant zone" and Catholics were not allowed to enter it. In fact, during the colonial period the English had divided Sudan into "religious zones" so that one religion or church could not carry out any activities in the area of another.
4. The lack of means and resources for evangelization because of the poverty of the Nuer people due to the war and the absence of ecclesiastical institutions to support their missionary work.

The catechists used two very simple but effective methods. First of all, they made continuous missionary journeys. When they arrived in a village, a family would welcome them. Hospitality is a great value in the culture of Nuer. They began to preach in the house where they were welcomed and in public places, and little by little people joined them. Then they formed their catechumenate and this group was given a more formal formation. On Sundays they celebrated the liturgy of the Word under a tree; many curious people went to see, and after several Sundays they joined the catechumenate. Another method was to choose a missionary family and send them to live in another village where the Church had not been founded. When they arrived at the place, the missionary family would start praying the rosary every day in their home, on Sundays they would do the liturgy of the Word, after which they would cross the city in uniform, carrying Catholic flags, playing drums and singing Catholic songs. People who were curious asked them why they behaved differently from the rest of the ordinary people. In response they told them about their Catholic faith and how Jesus had transformed their lives. When they had a good number of catechumens, they called an itinerant catechist whose ministry was to teach and organize the new ecclesial community.

When the catechumens were ready for baptism, a catechist would come and be entrusted with the ministry of baptism. Upon his arrival he organized a visit to the catechumens' homes to identify and burn the objects of the old religion as a sign of their conversion. In a solemn celebration of the Word

of God the new Catholics were baptized. Catechists and Catholics from other communities participated in the celebration and celebrated the new community that had been born.

Then they elected ministers from among the newly baptized people for the services needed to strengthen and grow the new community. They chose a catechist to continue teaching the Catholic faith, another catechist to support; a third catechist-teacher to teach the children so that people could read and write in their own language and read the Bible. They also chose guides for the youth, formed youth groups and liturgical singing and dancing groups. They also chose guides for women in the Legion of Mary group; some catechists to be itinerant missionaries and a couple of missionary families. Some families were also chosen for the ministry of hospitality and formed a committee to build their chapel.

In short, they established communities and ministries with the capacity to develop and strengthen themselves. Missionary communities that from birth have sent itinerant missionaries and missionary families to other communities. Self-sufficient communities, since all missionary activities were financed with their own resources: sending missionaries, starting and strengthening communities, building chapels and structures necessary for pastoral work, supporting their catechists, caring for guests, drums, uniforms, flags, schools to teach reading and writing in Nuer, etc.. The catechists formed communities with a clear Catholic identity: they always prayed to God for the Pope and to ask him to send missionaries, because the Catholic Church was not complete without the Eucharist. Finally, they went as far as Nairobi to ask the Combonians - who had the provincial house there at that time of war - to send priests to celebrate the Eucharist.

The first of the Combonians who arrived in Leer, the center of all the missionary operations of the catechists, to establish a missionary presence, was deeply surprised by what he found, by the missionary work done by the catechists who, moved by the power of the Spirit, had created an entire local self-sufficient, ministerial and missionary Church. They understood that the Holy Spirit worked wonders through the catechists and it would have been a great mistake to ignore everything they had found. They understood that the people of Nuer are intelligent, creative, enthusiastic, zealous in their commitment, capable of leading the Church alone and sending missionaries.

Faced with this reality, the missionaries chose, as a methodology, to accompany lay leaders and train them to continue to be protagonists of their own evangelization and to promote self-sufficient, ministerial and missionary communities. They also chose to walk with the people at their own pace, speed and style. They adopted a simple lifestyle, close to the people, using simple means for missionary work and, like the catechists, they traveled throughout the parish on foot, walking as catechists did and continue to do.

For personal and community reflection:

- What strikes me about this experience of collaboration? Why?
- What does this experience provoke in me? For what reason?
- What does it say to us as a community?