

The Expulsion of Foreign Missionaries from South Sudan in 1964

The expulsion of foreign missionaries, both men and women, from South Sudan, deeply affected the people and the Church of South Sudan and Sudan. 53 years have passed and we can now look back at this distressing event with eyes that can see the magnificent work of the Lord who brought forth his Church to maturity after passing through painful times. We remember this event in the context of the celebration of the 150th anniversary of the Comboni institute: 150 years of fidelity to the mission of Evangelization in Africa.

On February 27, 1964, the Council of the Ministers of the Khartoum Government issued a decree expelling all foreign missionaries, both men and women, operating in the three provinces of Juba, Malakal and Wau in South Sudan. The BBC immediately reported the news: *“The Government of Sudan has decreed that all foreign missionaries working in South Sudan be deported. The decision affects about 300 missionaries majority of them Catholic. The measure has been taken because the missionaries abused the hospitality given them by Sudan and interfered With its affairs.”* Between February 27 and March 9, 1964, the missionaries left the country including 54 Comboni Sisters, 104 Comboni Missionaries, and 13 Mill Hill Missionaries from Malakal.

The expulsion had actually started In 1961 and ended on May 17, 1964, when the Government expelled another four Comboni Missionaries from Mading/Abyei, and Monsignor Edoardo Mason, Bishop of El Obeid who was previously Bishop of Wau.

The effects of the expulsion

The expulsion was a major event for the mission of South Sudan and for the Comboni family and the consequences were many. At that time in South Sudan, **lus commissionis** (*entrusting certain mission territories to particular religious groups*), which was abolished in 1974, was still in force. The Institute was therefore fully responsible for the mission and had to provide personnel and financial resources to carry on the work of evangelization that is, the work of planting the church (Implantation ecclesia).

The expulsion was very traumatic for those who had been expelled and for the 58 Christian communities that were left behind. In the church of South Sudan, only one indigenous bishop, Mgrs. Ireneo Dud of Wau, and 28 Sudanese priests including three Comboni Missionaries, Fr. David Urasi, Fr. Peter Magalasi and Fr. Bamaba Deng were left. The latter was later killed in

August 1965. Three young local congregations of Sisters, the Nazareth Sisters in Wau (started by Bishop Mason), the Sisters of Our Lady of the Victories in Mupoi (started by Mgrs. Ferrara), and the Sacred Heart Sisters in Juba (started by Bishop Mazzoldi) were left in the country.

Also left were two institutes of Sudanese brothers; the Saint Martin De Porres Brothers started in Juba by Bishop Mazzoldi and Fr. Marengoni, and the Brothers of Saint Joseph in Wau. Despite the difficulties, these local congregations found their way and went on with their work. Though they had to leave the country; the missionaries remained united in heart and prayer with the Christian communities in South Sudan. They made a pilgrimage to The Sanctuary of Our Lady of Lourdes to entrust the situation of South Sudan and the South Sudanese Church to the Blessed Virgin Mary. They had the consolation of a special audience with Pope Paul VI who expressed to them the solidarity of the whole Church with them.

The Pope encouraged them to stay strong and expressed his wish that Khartoum might reconsider its decision to expel missionaries. In many ways, the Vatican tried to dialogue with the Government of Khartoum for a possible return of the missionaries to the South and having a stronger presence in the North. But fruits were not to be quickly realized.

If the grain does not fall and die, it cannot bear fruit

The question that was buzzing in the mind of many missionaries was what would happen to the Sudanese Church now that the missionaries were not there? What is clear today is that the experiences made the Sudanese Church stand on its own thus making it a mature Church with its own priests, religious and finally its own hierarchy. In 1975 two Sudanese priests, Mgrs. Gabriel Zubeir Wako and Mgrs. Joseph Abangite Gasi were ordained bishops and in 1976, after the appointment of two more bishops, the Sudan Catholic Bishops' Conference (SCBC) was inaugurated. In spite of violent persecution, the Christians of South Sudan held on faithfully to the Gospel even to the shedding of their blood. Four priests died martyrs along with a good number of Christians. The difficult situation in the South forced many people to find refuge in the North.

As a consequence of this internal migration, the North, which previously was almost exclusively muslim, witnessed the birth of a Sudanese Church. Some ethnic groups that had been scarcely touched by the evangelization in the South, like the Dinka and the Nuer, became Christians. Meanwhile, because of the civil war 1955 to 1972, the congregations of Sisters spread their formation into neighboring countries. The Sacred Heart Sisters went into Moyo in Uganda assisted by Sr. Elisabetta Coggi. Meanwhile, the Sisters of Our Lady of the Victories escaped to Obo (Central Africa) and were assisted by the Comboni Sisters Melania Morelli and Flora

Teresa Rebellato. They returned to Sudan after the war and at the invitation of the SCBC. The Nazareth Sisters of Wau and the Sisters of Our Lady of the Victories merged to form the Missionary Sisters of the Blessed Virgin n Mary.

The expulsion of missionaries from South Sudan was also an occasion for the Comboni institutes to open communities in other African Countries. They went to Congo, Central Africa and Chad in order to accompany the Sudanese refugees. They opened new missions in Uganda in Moroto that gave them basis to enter into Kenya, Ethiopia (Awassa), Togo, and elsewhere. The Comboni Sisters opened a community in Kenya that would later become a new province. The missionaries, male and female, also realised the relevance of spreading the Comboni charism to several other countries including those in the American and Asian continents. The expulsion was also an occasion for the two Comboni Institutes to give emphasis to the formation of local pastoral agents (priests, religious and lay people) and the promotion of Comboni vocations.

New African congregations with a missionary spirit were started, like the Apostles of Jesus and the Evangelizing Sisters of Mary. History was teaching that the Comboni motto Save Africa with Africa ~ was of paramount importance for the evangelization of South Sudan and the world. It meant forming self-ministering, self-supporting and self-propagating christian communities that would still give value to the Catholic concept of unity and solidarity between churches. The 1964 expulsion was certainly a moment of great suffering for the missionaries and even more for the people of South Sudan. And yet, it was part of the salvation history where the grace of God manifested itself even more strongly.

The situation of South Sudan today

In the last three years, the Bishops have not missed out on the chance to speak out against violence, politics that stir up tribalism and the dangerous path the nation has taken. The Gospel calls for conversion to uphold fraternity and reconciliation. It is the change that the nation badly needs today. People, from the poor citizens to the leaders, are greatly traumatized. Missionaries must necessarily preach the gospel and work to heal people from the many traumas that block the nation to be more human and develop consistently.

St Daniel Comboni, in his Plan for the Regeneration of Africa, said that the Catholic who is used to judging things in a supernatural light, looks upon Africa not through the pitiable lens of human interest, but in the pure light of faith. There, he saw an infinite multitude of brothers who belonged to the same family as himself with one common Father in heaven (W 2742). In the same way, we Comboni Missionaries believe and pray that South Sudanese will come out at this crisis strange than ever, ready to face the challenges that history and life give it. We believe that

the people of South Sudan will rediscover their national identity and overcome the mi of violence, corruption, nepotism and tribalism. It will take time and it will be hard as was the birth of the South Sudanese Church. Today, people look at the Church and at the missionaries with great hope. We are therefore called to be fully part at this history carrying the joys and sorrows of the people we evangelize.

By Fr. Daniel Moschetti, MCCJ