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SOUTH SUDAN - In our missionary life – writes Fr. Krzysztof Zebik, mccj – we have always to be ready for changes of place. I feel sometimes like Jesus who says in the Gospel, “Foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head” (Mt 8:20). As missionaries, we are in one place today but we don’t know where we will be tomorrow. It is very easy to get used to certain things, like our community or our work. One day we can even feel that we know our work and what we do. We try to be experts in that. We as evangelisers, however, have to be ready for constant changes in our life, always open to what God has prepared for us.

The time came for me to leave my homeland, Poland, the magazine office and all the people I knew and to move on to my new destination: Old Fangak, in South Sudan. I think departures are always difficult moments for all of us and especially for our families. It is a time of change and of many unanswered questions. I was asking myself: how can I convince my family that South Sudan is nice, quiet and that I will be safe there? I was struggling with the news about the war in South Sudan, which was feeding our media. I was trying to convince my family that it was not as bad as they said. In reality even myself did not know how the situation in that Country would develop and even if I would have managed to reach my destination. At the end I was grateful that God solved all my problems and prepared a way for me to reach Old Fangak. I can say that the way was a bit muddy at the beginning and very muddy at the end.

The first mud was created by the bureaucracy of the Country and the check in and check out on the way to Old Fangak. Some were looking at me as to one who wanted to support rebels and most questions asked were about my camera and computer. All I could hear were the words: do you have a permission. Permission to carry the camera, the laptop, to travel around South Sudan... I was afraid, at a certain moment, that they would ask me if I had the permission to breathe the air of the Country. However, the Lord is always great and He solved all the problems we were encountering on the way. I was not afraid. I had put my life in His hands

saying, You wanted me to be here, so You solve all the problems. I'm waiting. Truly, I didn't wait long. A few hours later I was in Old Fangak, safe and with all my belongings on a small patch of dry land in the long flooded airstrip.

At that point the second mud started, the mud created by the rain and the flood that covered large parts of Old Fangak, destroying many houses and pushing people to higher grounds. I arrived a few days before the visit of our Vicar General and Fr. Provincial, thus the people were busy preparing for their arrival. There were many preparations for the event. Catechists, after completing their training course, remained at the mission and waited for the visit. Other people came on foot from far distant villages and had to cross large swampy areas.

It was not easy to reach our place: our visitors were forced to land in Toch, a village built on higher grounds, because by then our airstrip was completely flooded. They had to travel for about three hours by boat together with our goods.

The youth and the people started marching around, singing and beating drums from midday onwards. They were getting ready to welcome the important guests. Hours passed, one after the other.

I asked myself: how can they sing for hours without losing their voices? The sun set and everyone went back to the church. Fr. Christian remained at the river, feeding all the mosquitos and waiting for the guests. At around 7.30 p.m. they finally arrived. They were warmly received by our Christian community in the church and later we finally took our visitors at home. Providentially they arrived with all the goods, among which there were also the two beds and mattresses they were to sleep on. Fr. Christian had to give up his room and find space among the tools of the workshop, whereas Fr. Gregor lied among the books of his veranda.

During the visit we had time to stay together and share about our missionary joys and worries. The visit started officially with the Sunday Mass on the following day. In the afternoon we gathered again in front of the church where there was a special welcoming celebration. It was a moment of dances, plays and songs. At the end, Fr. Jeremias received a chicken, a goat, a calabash with food and a gourd for milk. As we didn't manage to book a seat on the return flight for the chicken and the goat, these remained in the mission with us to enriched our diet.

The following day was reserved mostly for the issues regarding our Comboni community. It is always good to receive some encouragement and support for what we are doing here. There was time to have our personal meetings with Fr. Jeremias and to meet together as a community. When presenting the situation of our Institute and province, we heard about the usual concerns: personnel and issues of handing over our parishes. How can we go on serving people better when we are so few? We are aware that our time is hard and our Institute needs more prayers for vocations. This occasion was also a time of changes in personnel. Fr. Daniele was very grateful for the work of Fr. Christian, his passion, commitment and dedication for the Nuer people. There were also warm words to welcome me into the new community of Old Fangak.

In the meeting with the catechists and the community leaders, they expressed their joy and happiness. They had also the chance to list their expectations from our Institute. Apart from a Secondary School, a grinding mill and a long fence for the garden, there were also a request to have the Sisters and one Brother in the mission. Fr. Jeremias took note of their requests but did not promise anything, especially in this uncertain time. We have to work for peace in the Country, Fr. Jeremias remarked.

This Country is longing for peace. Many people know only the life in the refugee camps, as they are moved from one place to another. When will the leaders stop to destroy their own Country and their own people? We remain without answer. But peace is possible. There is hope. We are building peace when we seat together, when we share, when we talk. There is peace where there is understanding, cooperation, and good will. To start building peace in our own Comboni community we sat together and closed the day with a game of cards: chatting, laughing and playing “scala quaranta”. Peace is possible.

We couldn't let our guests leave before showing them the mission neighbourhood. Wearing gumboots became compulsory. We visited some compounds where people showed us how they had to struggle to protect their houses from the flood. Some houses had already been abandoned. Then we passed through the muddy market. We had to walk slowly to avoid sliding and bad falls. For the people who were watching us would have been a laughing matter for the whole day – “muddy kawaja”. On our way back, we met also some children who amazed us. They were playing a mini football. The players were covered in mud, each one with his own number on the back. There was a ball and the goal posts too. Two children were on their knees: one attacking and the other defending his goal post holding a stick with a piece of ply wood at its top. Creativity, first class.

I could see that even in the midst of flood, war and hunger, people's faces showed joy and

happiness. Though submerged in terrible situations, there's still hope. There is always a new day. Quickly I learned a lot from the people of Old Fangak. How many of us, if we were in that same situation, would not complain every day crying to God, why have you abandoned me? We would see everything in a negative way, filling our mind with violence, fear and anger. Food is bad, the roof is leaking, the bed is too short, mosquitoes are too many, etc. These people take every day as a gift from God. Even if they have to scoop out the water from their hut all day long, they do it with a smile. No one ever told us missionaries: look how we are suffering. We all know the situation in South Sudan. We live in difficult times. Therefore, we should bring a smile to those who are suffering now. A smile of peace, a smile of hope, a smile of love.

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