Columns
Ministry
Migration



May 2017: A boy stands at a row of water jugs in the Rhino Refugee Camp, part of the Bidibidi refugee settlement camp housing more than 1 million people from South Sudan in Uganda. (CNS photo/Paul Jeffrey)



by Mary Lilly Driciru

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The concept of "building the kingdom of God" gets clearer when the values of consecrated persons, witnesses and promoters of the kingdom shine out in their apostolate in the service of the new poor and rejects — street children, refugees and victims of trafficking in persons — the suffering face of Jesus for us today.

The Association of the Religious in Uganda (ARU) show us how to see the suffering face of Jesus. All it takes is a visit to Bidibidi refugee settlement area. (See a map of the camps that make up the settlement.) One of the world's largest refugee settlement camps in the world, it covers 250 square kilometers of the eastern half of the district of Yumbe, stretching southward from the South Sudanese border and spilling over into Moyo District along the western bank of the Kochi River.

At Bidibidi camp, one can become a witness of what Jesus said in Matthew 9:35-38: "…*the harvest is great but the laborers are few*…" The Missionary Sisters – Servants of the Holy Spirit (SSpS) together with Divine Word Missionary priests serve the needy among the South Sudanese refugees.

Sr. Dorothea Poli — a team leader and my contact person — explained that their apostolate includes: education, social work, health services and pastoral work. Prior to the South Sudanese Civil War, they were serving as missionaries in the Diocese of Yei. Unfortunately in 2016, their mission was interrupted when Holy Spirit Sister Veronika, Theresia Racková, who served as a medical doctor, was shot dead in Yei while transporting a mother who was due for delivery to a referral hospital. This event required them to withdraw to their regional house in Ethiopia.

Sister Dorothea who has been in charge of the Society of the Missionary Holy Childhood since 2017, continued; "We teach them [the refugees] how to pray and make rosaries, especially the missionary rosary. We train the youth animators to guide the children. So far, we have trained 150 animators from 30 chapels. Father Andrew is making arrangement to train more catechists."

The pastoral agents are confronted with many challenges, including cultural challenges and differences, but English is the medium of communication. Tribal differences and revenge are common phenomena among the refugees, but the sisters endeavor to ensure harmony in diversity. Other challenges include inadequate teaching materials, long distances to travel to the settlement camps, and some flocks that are joining other faiths and sects. The sisters also accompany

people who have attempted suicide, families headed by children who lost their parents to the persistent war in South Sudan, and those experiencing scarcity of food, fuel wood, and water (during the dry season, the water level gets lower).

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The issue of food is crucial. One of the activities includes a day of inter-chapel competition, friendly contests among four chapels in the camp. During Mass one day, I noticed a sudden drop in energy in the voices of the church choir. The response and participation from the congregation was also "dead." I whispered to the sister next to me, "Aren't they being tortured by hunger?"

"Yes!" she replied. And immediately the celebrant, Divine Word Fr. Andrew Dzida observed, "Sorry, I know you are hungry; many of you came a long way without breakfast. Soon you will have something to eat!" Right after Mass, the sisters offered sweets to the hungry crowd while they were waiting for food.

Despite these challenges, many of the refugees remain hopeful. At the beginning of the day Joyce Night Nyume shared her thoughts: "We are happy today to meet friends from other chapels. I learned a lesson about the love of Christ for children, and Christ has shown us the way to behave. Today being the feast of the Conversion of St. Paul, [we saw how] Jesus challenged Saul, who became Paul."

A catechist added; "We are growing in all ways; we are happy for the chapel council members who have organized this inter-chapel competition and parents' day. We just invited Father Andrew and the sisters to officiate for the day." And he added the good news, "We have so far witnessed nine weddings and 700 confirmations in 2019, in the four zones [of the camp]. From 2016 to date, the pastoral agents administered 3,000 baptisms."

The event showcased how chapel leaders guide the members of missionary childhood, through competitions in Bible quizzes, drama and cultural performances. The winners were awarded prizes, but all the participants received gifts for motivation. The sisters continually follow up with the animators, facilitate seminars, and carry out activities all over Bidibidi camp.

The community of sisters there is comprised of six sisters from six countries: Philippines, Indonesia, Poland, India, China and Nigeria. They move around the camp

in teams of two as they engage in pastoral service among the refugees.

Among other programs, the children are taken through a program called "Ready Feet." This invites children and youth in the process of growth and maturity to start practicing what they are assimilating through the catechetical and formative process of the mission. Next is "Growing Seed," which encourages their growth and development as instruments as "missionary seeds." Then, "Burning Heart" helps children contemplate realities of the world through their experiences of faith and helps them to own these realities. The children are also encouraged to help other children.

The most wonderful and funny part of the event came immediately after lunch, when the crowd came back to life! There was lively participation in traditional dances; in fact, the recreation continued even after the official end of the function, with families departing as they wished.

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