News
Ministry

Graduates of Loreto Rumbek in South Sudan — a Catholic school run by Loreto Sister Orla Treacy and her order, the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary — are seen in this undated photo preparing to go to university in Nairobi, Kenya. (OSV News/courtesy Loreto Rumbek)

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When three Loreto Sisters from Ireland arrived in Rumbek, South Sudan, in 2006, only 13 girls were in secondary education in the capital of Lakes State. The sisters opened the first secondary school for girls in 2008 with 35 students.

Eighteen years later over 500 girls have graduated from Loreto Rumbek and many are now completing a post-secondary education.

Decades of conflict ahead of independence in 2011, followed by civil war and famine, has taken its toll on South Sudan's education and health systems. The world's newest country has the third lowest literacy rate globally. Nearly three-quarters of the population over age 15 cannot read or write, with the vast majority women and girls.

Irish Sister Orla Treacy, a member of the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary, as the Loreto Sisters are formally known, is director of the Loreto Rumbek mission. She has worked tirelessly to improve the plight of girls, challenging forced child marriage and the neglect of girls' education.

Today Loreto Rumbek's secondary boarding school enrollment has expanded to 385 girls. The mission also runs a primary school for over 1,200 boys and girls, as well as a healthcare facility and a feeding program, as most of the children arrive at school hungry.

On a visit to Ireland in early September, Orla was accompanied by two graduates of Loreto Rumbek — Elizabeth Adak, who in 2022 qualified as a lawyer and is now

working in Juba as a legal adviser to the government, and Mary Nyanarop, who is working with Norwegian People's Aid as an education officer.

Speaking to OSV News, Adak explained that her parents were supportive of her education. But "when my father passed on, my mother could not support my education because of limited resources. I was funded by the Loreto Sisters in my secondary and my university education."

She is now supporting the education of her younger brothers and sisters and nieces. "I pay the school fees of 15 members of my family."

Nyanarop told OSV News that she, along with five other graduates of Loreto Rumbek living in Aweil, 250 miles north of Rumbek, approached Orla to ask the Loreto Sisters to expand their mission to that part of the Northern Bahr el Ghazal state, along the border with Sudan.

"In Aweil there are many girls suffering forced marriages, and they don't have good quality education. I know what Loreto has done for me. I want the same benefits extended to Aweil so that girls get the same support as I got from Loreto," she said.

"The church has done a lot in the lives of girls and for their education. I am the product of the Catholic Church. Loreto rescued me from a forced marriage," she emphasized.

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Twenty-eight-year-old Nyanarop, who is now married and has a 2-year-old daughter, Amou, said she hopes her child will have a Loreto education from primary right through secondary school.

But according to Orla, Catholic education requires investment, and $27 million is needed for the new mission in Aweil and to keep the mission in Rumbek going, of which $11 million is needed to build the new school and medical facility.

The delegation addressed a host of Loreto schools in Ireland where they appealed to students to buy a building block for the Aweil mission. According to Nyanarop, the Irish students became "emotional" when they heard her story of escaping a forced marriage.

"They are interested and want to support us," she told OSV News. They also met with Misean Cara, a mission support ministry that provides funding to missionary development projects from the Irish government.

"It is a five-year project. We hope to build the mission within that time frame," Orla explained.

The cost of a year's education in primary school for a student is $440, including the feeding program and medical care at the clinic, while $890 covers the cost of secondary school for borders.

While the idea for a new mission came from Loreto Rumbek's past pupils in Aweil, Orla explained, "We are a religious congregation and so we have to work through the Catholic network. The bishop of Wau and the parish priest of Aweil are very supportive."

The Irish nun in 2021 accepted the International Women of Courage Award from the U.S. State Department for her "exceptional courage and leadership in advocating for peace, justice, human rights, gender equality and women’s empowerment, often at great personal risk and sacrifice."

She said Nyanarop had had a meeting a week earlier with the South Sudan ministry responsible for the Aweil area and was handed the deeds for the land on which the new mission will be built, donated by the government.

"We have the land. Ideally, we would love to start in November if we have some funding. We are ready to go — we just need money," she explained.