



SOLIDARITY with South Sudan

Insights from South Sudan

A Personal Reflection

by

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I am Elizabeth (Betty) Ryan an Irish member of the Society of the Sisters Faithful Companions of Jesus (FCJ) and came to Solidarity with South Sudan (*Solidarity*) in November 2008. I have completed my three-year contract and signed a new eighteen-month one to finish in June 2013. My *Solidarity* community is Malakal, Upper Nile State but I have taught for shorter or longer periods in five other States. I am presently in Wau tutoring in English in the Solidarity Health Training Institute.

My previous ministry had been in Ireland, in FCJ co-educational second level schools where I filled various roles.



English had been my main subject but I had moved out of education and, after my term of office in provincial leadership, had hoped to move into spirituality and spiritual accompaniment. **Then the God of surprises and Solidarity with South Sudan came calling!**

Being from a rural farming background and having always lived in community, have been enormously helpful as preparation for the simple life in Solidarity with South Sudan. Primary School training would have proved more beneficial for teaching English here. Not being from a “missionary” congregation my prior contact with Africa had been in Kenya where from 2003- 2007 I had done Retreat work with an indigenous Kenyan congregation for a month or two each year. Without this I would not be in South Sudan.

As I reflect on life here I consider some things to be of paramount importance: **Health, prayerfulness, the ability to get on with oneself and other people**, flexibility, annual leave. The environment, climate and terrain (unsealed so uneven- making walking a challenge) are taxing so good health is a necessity.



Prayerfulness is the bedrock of community life and ministry. To be able to live with oneself to some degree is also a necessity as is ability to live healthily in community. A visitor once asked me what community meant for me – my immediate reply was “living with whoever is here at the time.” I would still maintain that stance and add living in whatever community (Solidarity or other) that I find myself in from time to time! Flexibility with regard to where and what one teaches has become more urgent as Solidarity with South Sudan extends its ministry to places and programmes other than *Solidarity* locations. Annual leave is a “must” for me. Fortunately Sudan is

near enough to Europe to return to Ireland each July, make my 6/8 day directed retreat, get medical check-ups, catch up with FCJs, family, friends, recharge the batteries and feast my eyes on the verdant countryside.

If asked what takes the greatest toll of me here I think it is the environment. I have a new appreciation of the line in Psalm 23: “like a dry, weary land without water” – I can feel like that especially after about nine months. Luckily by then the green fields of Ireland are on the horizon! The line “pleasant coolness in the heat” from one of the hymns to the Holy Spirit helps me appreciate even the slightest breeze!

Asked what gives me life, I will readily respond: “People – *Solidarity* and South Sudanese.” Living with so many cultures has its challenges but its richness outweighs those. I see it as a blessing that I have had the opportunity to meet and share life with so many – being an outgoing personality makes that easier. On the other hand I feel my introvert side has grown - time is not rationed here – props are! While the laptop is a necessity for work and the internet (what a blessing!) for contact with the world there is little else by way of props or variety – so one is thrown back on one’s own resources.



The South Sudanese are a beautiful people to teach – welcoming, eager and despite all their sufferings have a sense of humour and a resilience that is endearing and inspiring. Despite this, teaching here is not easy due to climate, lack of educational aids or the fuel to turn on the generator to use the technology. Chalk and Talk becomes the medium! One has to take the long view in all of life here – we live an Advent reality (**waiting, hoping**) in season and out of season. What I do know is that being here at this juncture of the country’s evolution, and playing some small part in developing what is the national language and medium of education for this and future generations, is **a privilege for which I am truly grateful.**

Solidarity with South Sudan
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