

# Distinct Voice: Creating Circles & a Culture of Mercy



## **Scholasticah Nganda rsm (The Congregation): 'Solidarity with South Sudan'**

Distinct Voice by Sr Scholasticah Nganda, a Kenyan Mercy Sister serving in South Sudan with Solidarity with South Sudan.

After decades of civil war in South Sudan, the Catholic bishops of South Sudan in 2005 invited international religious communities to consider serving in South Sudan to help address the country's critical educational, health and pastoral needs. Since that time, many religious congregations have been involved in a collaborative project called Solidarity with South Sudan which empowers and supports the Sudanese people to rebuild their lives, communities and societal structures. But as South Sudan continues to fade from the global news spotlight and faces the reality of a fragile and possibly failing state, the story of what Solidarity with South Sudan is doing in South Sudan is not likely to be told in full. However, the works Solidarity with South Sudan male and female religious are doing is the truest sense of what it means to be a mission church and a global example of empowering others. I feel a sense of purpose in living in solidarity with those in South Sudan, and privileged being a member of a group that continues to serve the poor and marginalised people in a spirit of solidarity, joy and with the hope for a better future.

The Solidarity with the South Sudan Project borne at the request of the South Sudan Bishops Conference is currently supported by more than 200 female and male congregations, members of the international union of superior general, UISG and the union of superior general, USG. At present the project have 5 inter-congregational communities with 21 religious men and women from 17 different congregations.

The project focuses on health, agriculture, professional teacher training and pastoral initiatives, expressing a new paradigm of collaboration, between congregations for a more effective response to the immense and urgent needs of South Sudan.

I am grateful for how their spirit has persistently invited me to greater openness and availability for this mission with Solidarity with South Sudan. I am proud to say, just as the challenges are great in South Sudan, so too are the graces. As I continue to minister in South Sudan, I am becoming aware that graces abound and overflow in places most unexpected. This is a mission filled where the opportunities for mercy presence are limitless. Just to be serving the youngest and the poorest nation in our world is a blessing, an invitation for creating circles and culture of mercy.

One cannot think of creating circles and culture of mercy without reflecting on Pope Francis's image of the church as oriented towards missionary activities. It is crucial that we note that the missionary activity of the church is directed towards contemporary outskirts that strongly mark human existence.

My ministry in South Sudan has opened my eyes and now I can see that outskirts are the new challenge for the church. Nevertheless, the church's main mission remains that of revealing more strongly signs of God's presence and closeness in the world.

While I have had to think hard how best to be a participant in this mission, more often than not I have found myself almost losing hope. This is when your results are slow to come by. But as if to prove me wrong in assuming instant results, there have been times where the spirit has calmed my fears through an inspiration: God's presence is best revealed through my living out or testifying for mercy.

Serving in the ministry of the very poor and marginalised people of South Sudan, I have heard myself being challenged to be and do mercy. There's no doubt in my mind that this is God

inviting those I work with and for, as well as myself, to widen the circles and culture of mercy in a country torn apart by endless tribal wars, insecurity, poverty and abuse of human rights.

For me mercy is becoming today more than ever the fundamental criteria of our authenticity of the church, a church that is on the way and that goes out of itself. Defined by mercy in its fullness, I am hopeful that those who minister in the outskirts, in the periphery where mercy is needed most, will continue to move the church towards God's glory and salvation of human beings. Indeed, the missionary outreach to contemporary outskirts is becoming an imperative that has been put in front of the church by Pope Francis. I cannot have a better understanding of outskirts than a few of a poor and marginalised people of South Sudan is having a special place.

Majority of the South Sudanese are deprived of basic necessities of life, such as food, shelter and security. Practically, mercy is the only way to challenge a culture that excludes and rejects these people from living a normal human life assured of basic human needs. And in my view, the answer to what else South Sudan lies in the promotion of a culture of integration. In fact a culture I believe the works of mercy become a possible response to many a contemporary outskirt, evident in South Sudan, the youngest and poorest nation in our world.

In the words of Pope Francis, this is pastoral compassion which is shaped daily by the renewing force of mercy as part of the new evangelisation. The object of mercy is human life itself and everything it embraces. I am here persuaded to think about the seven corporal and spiritual works of mercy. These works of mercy acknowledge to me to see the need to break with the logic of violence, exploitation and selfishness that daily afflict the political and economic life of many South Sudanese in their own country.

In certain environment mercy itself is constantly felt in every action that seeks to build a better South Sudan, and in extension, a better global space where inclusion and integration is characteristic of society.

In a country ravaged by decades of civil war, abject poverty and untold human sufferings of unimaginable magnitude, mercy becomes an infinite embrace that forgives and reconciles.

Creating circles and culture of mercy is in my view what our world asks for most. South Sudan is not an exception. The need for mercy can never end. Neither does God's offer of it. This is the source of my hope in the difficult moments as I continue to serve in South Sudan as a sister of Mercy, and a member of Solidarity with South Sudan. I must admit what motivates me deeply is how in collaboration with others I can make a situation better for another person. This is one of the reasons why I volunteered to be missioned by my congregation to Solidarity with South Sudan.

In South Sudan I have witnessed what conflict can do to individuals and communities. How it can deprive youngsters of a tutor. How it can leave people feeling hopeless and helpless, but I am an optimist, who believes change can happen by continuing the efforts to achieve peace through forgiveness, mercy and reconciliation.

This is my view of what being a mercy presence is about in a world torn apart by indifference and exclusion. This is where creating circles and a culture of mercy becomes a fundamental imperative. Reading through scant literature available on South Sudan's volatile situation, one gets to know that for many intervention strategies have in the past been put in place, such as South Sudan ceasefire agreement sanctions, peace keeping operations and the agreement for the resolution and the conflict in South Sudan.

It must be remembered that these strategies have largely been influenced by realist and liberal paradigms to peace and security, with little attention to critical social psychological issues. If truth be told, these strategies have failed to achieve peace and equity for the people of South Sudan. One is then left wondering what is the way forward for durable peace, unity and reconciliation ought to be for the South Sudanese people. This gap nudges and compels me to

look elsewhere. That elsewhere is mercy presence, a creation of an evolving wave, an energy that embraces and offers an alternative path to peace for the almost disillusioned people of South Sudan.

No doubt the task is daunting but the payoff is worth the effort I believe. I am convinced that once as many of us as possible begin to create an environment that prioritises social - psychological issues of love, justice, trust, mercy, reconciliation, relationship building and security, we will be enabling integration to thrive. We will be letting in a presence we call mercy, a presence with a capacity for integration.

There cannot possibly be a better means to wholeness than efforts that galvanise and transform hate to love, and forgiveness to forgiveness, and that mercy and compassion towards the other. Indeed, this then becomes a practice of the works of mercy that is seen by Pope Francis as a way of life that cares for and shows mercy towards our brothers and sisters in all aspects of their existence and their need.

The challenge to be more merciful, more loving and less sentimental had never hit me so acutely, that I woke up to the reality of my own vulnerability. Did I need to be missioned to South Sudan so as to become aware that the object of mercy is human life itself and everything it embraces?

Human life in South Sudan is hugely broken and in need of deep healing. In this woundedness, I believe God is inviting me through works of mercy to be a wounded healer and a presence to a deeper unfolding of an already merciful existence.

The challenge is to guard against this service becoming a sporadic exercise in philanthropy.

The temptation to us in this direction is real.

As I continue to serve among the wounded of South Sudan and allow myself to be touched and transformed by their pain, I am learning to treat my daily interactions as opportunities to show and receive mercy.

In a nutshell, I am in the school of mercy, learning to be, receive, give and do mercy.

Is this not what is meant by creating circles and culture of mercy?

My prayer life is being challenged by these interactions and I feel invited to integrate my prayer life and works of mercy and allow them both to propel me into the world, and inflame my desire to enact God's mercy among those I live and serve. I pray that by my being a mercy presence in South Sudan, I would inspire the people I encounter to become oases of mercy, a glimpse of circles and culture of mercy.

For now, my contribution in making mercy global presence become a reality is to be and practice genuine love of God and my neighbour, and to grow in my capacity to see the needs of the poor and marginalised and find the courage to act on their behalf. This I believe will work towards creating circles and culture of mercy.

Please pray for peace for South Sudan.