

## ***Missio Dei* as drawing Hope through Education and Mercy**

On 1<sup>st</sup> April 2023 the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF), the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) and some civilian platforms were expected to sign an agreement to guide the transition of Sudan towards a democratic civilian government and the integration of both armies into a unified national one. Unfortunately, that event never arrived and the war between SAF and RSF broke out on 15<sup>th</sup> April 2023.

The missionary activity of the church in the country changed completely. The Archbishop of Khartoum and dozens of missionaries became displaced or refugee along with millions of Sudanese people.

### ***1. The War break out***

While other conflicts in the country had taken place in the peripheries, this one exploded in the capital, Khartoum, where most universities were located. The conflict expanded and affected 135 out of the 157 Sudanese universities. These government and private colleges and universities hosted around 87% of the students of the country<sup>1</sup>. Some of them left their home as the RSF soldiers entered their houses, pointed them with a *Kalashnikov* and obliged them to move with the minimum necessary and an uncertain future.

More than 11 million persons had to leave their homes as a consequence of this conflict and resettle in other cities of the country or abroad as refugees<sup>2</sup>. In this latter case, students who wished to continue their university journey could not do it, as the hosting universities require transcript details certificates authenticated by the Ministry of Higher Education and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs

of Sudan. All these procedures were impossible in a war country. Thousands of these university students had reached Egypt or South Sudan where it was almost impossible to find a job. Thus, which kind of future could expect this young people who had started a university career and could not continue it neither were able to find a job? The landscape was not much favourable for those who had remained in Sudan, scattered throughout villages or towns where economic activities were in standby or occupied by the original inhabitants.

Another segment of population particularly affected by the war were persons with chronic and terminal diseases. Most of the local companies of medicines were established in the city of Wad Medani that was invaded by the RSF on 15<sup>th</sup> December 2023. This invasion blocked the local production of medicines. Moreover, the arrival of thousands of wounded and displaced persons in the areas under SAF control led to the collapse of the few working health facilities that had to give priority for injured persons.

### ***2. Comboni College of Science and Technology and Missio Dei***

The Comboni Missionaries established an educational institution in Khartoum in 1929, Comboni College Khartoum (CCK), which in 2001 developed a higher education section, the Comboni College of Science and Technology (CCST), in collaboration with the local church and some Muslim Sudanese citizens. This institution had 768 students before the war. 58% of them were Sudanese, 27% were South Sudanese and 15% were Eritrean and Ethiopian refugees.

The university college expressed its missionary identity in different ways that aimed to bring “the Good News into all the strata of humanity, and through its influence transforming humanity

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<sup>1</sup> Naranjo Alcaide, J.C. (2025). A University College Working in the Midst of the War in Sudan through Digital Education. *Social Education Research*, 6(2), 180–198. <https://doi.org/10.37256/ser.6220256254>

<sup>2</sup> IOM, *Sudan Mobility Overview*. September-October 2024. <https://dtm.iom.int/reports/sudan-mobility-overview-3#:~:text=Sudan> hosted an estimated 11%2C188%2C057,countries since 15 April 2023.

from within and making it new”<sup>3</sup>. This need of transforming society was completely necessary to heal the tribal and interreligious tensions that were among the main factors behind the different civil wars that had torn the country since 1955.

Thus, evangelizing a society divided by conflicts meant to make of CCST a space where every student and staff member, regardless of the religious or tribal affiliation, experiences the beauty of diversity as a gift created by God and of the service to the weakest as a force to transform the community and experience the encounter with the Crucified One.

To shape such a space, the College had prayer rooms for Muslims and Christians, started every event with prayers by believers of both religions, celebrated Christian and Islamic feasts, offered lecturers of Christian and Islamic religion for the students to choose and made special efforts to find financial support for the academic fees of students coming from marginalized areas of the country such as Darfur or Nuba Mountains.

The education to service was channelled through the volunteer’s group in palliative care, coordinated by the Nursing department but open to students of all the academic programs. Muslim and Christian students and staff members were supporting persons with terminal and chronic diseases in the Oncological Center of Khartoum, not far from the College, or in the center for persons with TB managed by the Missionaries of Charity. The eyes of the students were shining every time they came from serving persons in such situations.

In *Gaudium et Spes* (no.22) the II Vatican Council mentions an action of the “Holy Spirit in a manner known only to God” through which every person of good will is “associated with the paschal mystery”. This action would explain how Muslim students and staff members could also be associated to the Paschal mystery whenever they experience the pain of the person with terminal and chronic disease as a call to go out from themselves and support him/her.

This missionary understanding of the action of the College would be in tune with the concept of *Missio Dei* that represents a “missiological attempt to articulate a theocentric concept of mission with reference to the missionary nature and act of the triune God”. Surely, the missionary praxis in a Muslim majority country like Sudan looks more coherent with the concept of *Missio Dei* than with a narrow ecclesio-centric understanding of mission “which was predominant within the Western global missionary movements in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries”<sup>4</sup>.

In this perspective, the triune God is both the sender and the sent in mission<sup>5</sup> and should be the sole source and content of any missionary activities<sup>6</sup>. This also leads to overcome a limited understanding of mission reduced to proselytization and to think of “a creative enterprise of word and deed in the formation and the transformation of individual lives and of cultural and social patterns”<sup>7</sup>.

Nadia Abdalla Idris, a Muslim student, explained with simple words what she experienced in the school and what could be interpreted as individual and social transformation:

*Comboni schools have fought, and I hope they will always continue to fight, the great enemy that is ignorance, because it is blind ignorance that is behind the pain that we cause to each other. The more we learn, the more aware we become of the variety of possibilities and options that can open up to us. Comboni schools, by increasing the number of educated men and women, definitely contribute to*

<sup>4</sup> Baik, Chung-Hyun and Sinwoong Kim (2024). ‘Missio Dei’, St Andrews Encyclopaedia of Theology. Edited by Brendan N. Wolfe et al.

<https://www.saet.ac.uk/Christianity/MissioDei>

<sup>5</sup> Engelsen, Tormod (2003). ‘Missio Dei: The Understanding and Misunderstanding of a Theological Concept in European Churches and Missiology’, *International Review of Mission*, 92 (367), p. 483.

<sup>6</sup> Andersen, Wilhelm (1955). *Towards a Theology of Mission: A Study of the Encounter Between the Missionary Enterprise and the Church and Its Theology*. London: SCM Press, p. 47.

<sup>7</sup> Lehmann, Paul L. (1952). ‘The Missionary Obligation of the Church’, *Theology Today*, 9 (1), p. 22.

<sup>3</sup> *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, no. 18.

*creating a climate of mutual understanding and tolerance. In our respective tribes and different cultures, we must strive to find strength and enrichment, not the reason for war and destruction. Comboni schools contribute to peace in Sudan by teaching young people that it is okay to be different, it is okay to be yourself and to be an educated person.*

Nonetheless, the war broke out again on 15<sup>th</sup> April 2023 and the new context challenged the missionary identity of the College in a different way.

### **3. Education and health on the move**

Two months after the war began, Comboni College of Science and Technology (CCST), distributed among the students an online questionnaire prepared with *Google Forms* application to ask whether they wanted to continue their studies or prefer to wait for better times. The headquarters of this university was in the center of the capital, just 800 meters from the presidential palace and therefore became the scene of fighting from the first day of the war. Since then, students and staff of the university have never been able to return to their headquarters. Among the 768 students registered before the war, 256 responded to the questionnaire administered between June 17 and August 12, 2023. In summary, 176 expressed their desire to continue studying despite the situation in the country (68.7%) while 78 students (30.5%) responded negatively to the question: "If the College starts the second semester on August 7, 2023, would you be available to follow the lessons through an online learning management system?" The questionnaire also assessed the feasibility of the operation concerning the access to the internet of the students, the financial implications and the availability of teaching staff.

On the 15<sup>th</sup> October 2023 the Minister of Higher Education authorized universities to shift their programs into online or to relocate them in safe places of the country or even abroad. Some Sudanese universities opened centres in Egypt or other countries. Comboni College of Science and Technology decided to open new offices in the city of Port Sudan, located in the Northeast of the country and controlled by the SAF. There, the Comboni Missionaries run a

Secondary School that had some rooms abandoned. The College opened an office to manage the Learning Management System and re-organize activities.

Most of the members of the nursing department had taken refuge 200 km south of Khartoum, in the city of Wad Medani, along with some students and lecturers. With the funding of a project the College planned to establish also some offices there to provide them access to the internet and to combine the online activities with the organization of clinical practice for the students of the Bachelor Degree in Nursing Sciences.

On 15<sup>th</sup> December 2023 the RSF invaded Wad Medani which obliged students and staff to leave their refuge and set on the move again. This time the nursing team headed Port Sudan, where they reached at the beginning of January 2024 after completing the 1,100 km that separate both locations.

After sharing our plans with the State Ministry of Health, the team organized the clinical practice of the nursing students and registered the first nursing clinic of the country. This clinic is a very unique one as it is a Palliative Care Hospice completely managed by nurses.

The Principal and the Program Coordinator of the BSc in Nursing Sciences met the Director of the Oncological Center of Port Sudan to coordinate the palliative care service of the clinic with the one of the Center. When we introduced our program to the Director, Dr. Itidal Ibrahim, a Muslim Sudanese oncologist, she confessed that after having joined the first batch of the course of introduction to Palliative Care for health professionals organized by the College in Khartoum in 2016<sup>8</sup>, she had prayed "Almighty God" to have the possibility of applying the learnt contents in her home town, Port Sudan. For her, our arrival as a consequence of the war was God's answer to her prayers

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<sup>8</sup> Damanhuri, G., & Marhoom, M. (2021). Republic of Sudan-Palliative Care-Hope for the future. In M. Silbermann (ed.), *Palliative Care for Chronic Cancer Patients in the Community*. Springer, pp. 231-239.



In the clinic, the nursing department works with a network of volunteers. Two hundred volunteers have been trained in 2024 in different locations of the outskirts of Port Sudan. They are Muslims and Christians moved by a common driver. Muslims start their prayer in the name of God the most merciful. Jesus revealed the merciful face of God. And mercy is the driver that moves these volunteers to go outside themselves in order to support families who accompany persons with terminal and chronic diseases.

The first group of 30 students of the Bachelor Degree in Nursing Sciences arrived to Port Sudan in May 2024. Some of them had to cross through areas under the control of the RSF to arrive to this SAF controlled region after dozens of military checkpoints. Two students who were in Zalingei (West Darfur), fled away 1,058 km southwards until Aweil in South Sudan, then travelled eastwards 787 km until Juba and from there took the plane to Port Sudan. They were ready to fight for their own future.

#### **4. Restoring hope and transforming the community**

After the first group of nursing students, a second one arrived. This time they were 74. And their number continues growing. In June they will be 87 and the College will be allowed to register new comers, the first group since the beginning of the war. Until then it has worked with ongoing students registered before the war. Some of them explicitly said that they had lost hope after the war started. When they saw the first group of nursing students resuming studies they believed that it was possible to continue in the middle of the conflict and build a different future for their lives.

The action of the clinic and the volunteers in the community has also claimed the attention of some local NGOs who started supporting their service with donations of medicines and food. In a similar way, the nursing department has been invited to introduce the concept of palliative care to the 42 leaders of the popular committees of Red Sea State.



**Photo from SVD International Conference on Mission at the Pontifical Gregorian University, Rome**

In Port Sudan the nursing students had their clinical practice in the nursing skills lab the College equipped inside Comboni Secondary School and in several health centers. But they also supported the group of volunteers. In this way, the College integrated its academic activities with community service and transformation of this community through the attention to the weakest.

For the local population the word “Comboni” means education and refers to a church institution that has educated thousands of persons in the country since the XIX century<sup>9</sup>. The ongoing conflict has increased the esteem of the people. While international schools and national universities moved abroad, Comboni Schools and Comboni College of Science and Technology remained among the people of the country in a very challenging moment to share a mission of mercy

and hope. This mission has its source in the Triune God, goes beyond the limits of the Church and is carried out by the Catholic Church, not alone, but with Muslim persons. In this way, it touches and transforms the lives of concrete persons and communities of Islamic majority.

<sup>9</sup> Naranjo Alcaide, J. C. (2019). The Development of Catholic Schools in the Republic of Sudan. *Social and Education History*, 8(1), 83–111.

<https://doi.org/10.17583/hse.2019.3611>