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“How Beautiful Are Your Works”

As of today we have been in Senegal for 11 years, and on behalf of my community through this article I wish to thank Father Peter above all and the whole SEDOS team who asked us to contribute to the SEDOS Bulletin. We shall try to introduce all readers to the missionary venture the Missionary Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary (ICM) started with the local Church and the Senegalese people in Podor, Senegal. We have experienced and witnessed the love and fidelity of God, Master of the Mission, through various daily events.

For the records, the year 1968 marks the official start of the existence of the Parish of Saint Michel de Podor, Senegal. In 2018, the Parish celebrated its Golden Jubilee (50 years) of existence.

We, Missionary Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary (ICM), arrived in Senegal (Podor) on 13 March 2010, which was the beginning of a new missionary venture. Today, 13 March 2021, as we publish this article, the ICM has been working in Podor among Muslims for 11 years. May God be praised! At present the community consists of three Sisters.

Dear readers,

Allow us to tell you about our modest experience among the Senegalese people in the far North, mainly in Podor.

Our mission is like “yeast that raises the dough”; it is a mission of presence and example where there are no native Christians. Senegal is an exceptional Islamic country where Christians, Muslims and Animists are all part of the same family. Every day, we meet not only the Senegalese but also Mauriticians who cross the river daily to carry out their business activities. At the moment our borders are closed because of sanitary measures.

The mission in Podor specifically calls for missionary foresight and creativity to understand where our presence is needed and most useful. Each day we are called to envisage where we can shine and be visible witnesses to the love of God in the midst of our Muslim brothers and sisters. This daily effort expresses our will to renew the joy of being brothers and sisters of all without distinction of race, sex and religion.

INTER-RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE: SUPERVISION OF YOUNG CATHOLICS AND MUSLIMS IN TWO COLLEGES (Exchanges between Parents, Pupils and Imams)

Inter-religious dialogue is essential to our mission and it is present in all aspects of life. Mutual respect for the authenticity of each other's faith helps us to live in harmony and complementarity. We express this at all our meetings: Eucharist, prayer at the Mosque, lectures at the colleges, meetings: the parents of the students, the Imams, the panel, the Muslims who give Christians calendars at the beginning of the year with the image of Jesus, etc... The prayer is led by a Muslim or a Christian depending on the circumstances.

Senegal is known as a country of: **Peace**, (although fragile due to the events that took place in March this year, when men died), **Harmony** and **Religious Tolerance**.

In Senegal, marriage is complex. In North Senegal (Podor), there are the following problems:

- Early marriage: young girls aged from 11 to 13 are forced to marry.
- Marriage between first cousins, results in the problem of consanguinity in the family.
- Premature divorce.
- Excision: girls who have been mutilated feel marginalized.
- Very high divorce rate among parents, families reform, as a result an orphaned child is taken care of by a grandmother, uncle, aunt ...

The girl child is deprived of education, she has to learn to cook, take care of the children and her mother-in-law, especially in the surrounding villages.

- The phenomenon of village children who do not go to school.

Our Response: Our joys and challenges

The mission in Senegal corresponds to our ICM charism. We go where others do not want to go. **This mission requires an active presence.**

After careful observation and listening to the population that is contending with all the situations mentioned above, we organized ways to supervise **disabled children, women in the villages** and we give professional training in dressmaking and **cooking/catering classes to marginalized girls.**

Most of the uneducated girls and women dropped out of school prematurely because of early marriage.

Every year the number of girls increases. In **2012** we started with **three** girls, at present, that is to say in 2021, there are 70 girls, and 1 boy, who are all Muslim.

We are glad to be accepted and respected by the population, and share our differences.

Furthermore, it is rewarding when we can put a marginalized woman back on her feet, by teaching her a trade:

- Educate,
- Train,
- Promote,
- Provide psychological support in all cases of distress and revolt caused by early divorce and excision by helping them to integrate into society thanks to a profession.

CHALLENGES

- Acceptance and understanding of the other, whose religion is different from mine.
 - open to dialogue (dialogue of life).
 - The difference in the way we think about and do things: for example: during a lesson, a man came to the door either to check whether we were talking about Jesus to the students, or simply to ask for the *saricha* (alms).

□ People come to pray for the girls during class.

We notice that, while young people in other countries are anxious to get an education, in Podor girls drop out of school easily, either because of marriage or cooking without the parents worrying about it. Boys too give up easily to take the herd to graze, sometimes with the complicity of their parents.

The great challenges to be reckoned with in improving the environment are:

The harsh climate:

□ **Oppressive heat**

□ **Sand storms/Dust**

□ *Harmattan*

Due to the desertification, heat and harsh climate, we have planted flowers and fruit trees in an effort to counter global warming. In the orchard, among other things, we grow papaya that we then distribute to the population.

The fifth anniversary of Pope Francis' Encyclical has come at an opportune time: a global pandemic, and *Laudato Si's* Message is just as prophetic today as it was in 2015. This pandemic has given us time to think about how we can transform our world and environment.

COVID-19 presents a unique opportunity **to transform** the current difficulties and find new ways — linked in love, compassion and solidarity — to live together in a more **harmonious relationship with Nature, our common home**. This is why we took the initiative at the start of the COVID 19 Pandemic to sew protective masks — which we consigned to the Town Hall and the Prefecture. The masks made in our sewing workshop were our contribution to the local population in the fight against the Coronavirus Pandemic in Senegal.

Sister Jeanne sometimes goes on her rounds in a donkey-cart driven by a boy. This shows that God alone is at work in all our initiatives in Senegal. We always count on Divine Providence for everything: “Go, and the Spirit will lead you in new ways”.