



Akir and her baby at a transit centre in Renk, a bordering town between Sudan and South Sudan

Serving those furthest behind in South Sudan

As we get closer to Christmas, places like South Sudan lie heavy on my heart. As the youngest country in the world, getting its independence 12 years ago, it's still one of the poorest countries in the world. Life expectancy is 57 years... a far cry from our 82 years in Ireland.

My woes and stresses of being a working mum with 3 young kids, is a world apart from what most are enduring in South Sudan. With Christmas approaching, I take a quiet joy in dodging the panic present buying for friends and in-laws. I've long given up on deliberating over what presents to buy – presents that are meant to somehow show how dear they are to me. Mind you, if I'm honest, it's more

about never actually managing to get it right. This year, my plan is that they'll all get the same present, a gift for someone in South Sudan. That's a little stressor, I'm able to put neatly aside.

Hardship

I've always struggled to understand how a person can live through constant, unrelenting stress alongside the grief and trauma of losing their home, or

someone in their family. How someone can live through so much hardship, yet still find a way to smile, laugh and get through the day. In Ireland, I don't think we give enough acknowledgment to the resilience that some of us have had to build up throughout our childhood, particularly when it's saturated with trauma. Even at that, it can still be a mere fragment of what many in South Sudan have had to go through in their

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own childhood years. I asked Irish Jesuit, Tony O’Riordan, from Cork, who worked for over four years in Maban, South Sudan, how he made sense of it... how he understood where people got the energy to continue. Hope. Compartmentalisation. Grief is no less to the grief we have in Ireland but feeding your family requires you to get up early in the morning, start the charcoal fire, set about your day walking to get as much water as you can carry from a river/borehole miles away, then walk to the market to get a small plastic bag of long-life milk, to just make porridge for the kids. A task that takes 3 minutes for us in Ireland with a microwave, can literally take hours for someone living in a camp or rural area in South Sudan.

There are over 2 million people displaced in South Sudan – that’s equivalent to all the people in Munster and Connaught living in a temporary setting that is not their home.

As some of us start thinking of how we’ll celebrate Christmas day, 2 million South Sudanese are dreaming of finally making it back to their original homes. Conflict in Sudan, has forced them back down to South Sudan. Instead of being greeted by hearty Christmas dinners, warmth and comfort, they are returning to a bleak reality of finally making it back to their original homesteads. They’re not sure if their homestead is still there, or if someone else is occupying it... maybe by another displaced family, much like they were for the last 10-20 years. I’ve asked many returnees, what do you do, when you finally return to your original home and find a strange family living under the tree that you’ve planted yourself all those years ago. Their answer - patience. Many colleagues I worked with, talked about having to set up make-shift shelters on the outskirts of the camp, waiting for a time to come when it would be safe enough for them to get their homestead back, and for that family themselves to move on.

A tree that was planted in a homestead a generation ago, may not hold the warm memories we might expect – sheltering the family from the midday sun, or heavy rains. That tree could be holding so many memories and trauma, from rebels attacking, rounding up and killing children – neighbours children they had watched growing up. I remember all too well, a woman my age, Monica Illiha, still working her way through secondary school, point out a tree deep in the bush to me where she hid when the rebels last attacked, and that I should remember the route, as that’s where we were to meet if the rebels were to come again.

Counselling

Many families won’t even make it all the way home this Christmas, and will see themselves lucky to make it just across the border, to camps like Renk, where we are responding with partner, Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS), providing relief items and psychosocial counselling.



I get texts weekly from former colleagues I used to work with. More often, it's actually texts from their children who were toddlers 20 years ago when I first worked in South Sudan. It's rarely an ask, or a request for a transfer. More often it's just a text to say hello. To know that someone on another continent has the time to chat, to say a quick hello.

Working with the missionary congregations, in South Sudan, brings with it an immense sense of duty to reach those furthest left behind – to reach parts of South Sudan where the government and other NGOs can't reach, as they can be restricted by strict security protocols. There's a sense of pride that comes with that, for personnel that work with the missionaries. Personnel know they can get higher paid jobs elsewhere, but their heart is in serving those furthest behind.

South Sudan lights such a fire in our hearts, it's difficult to move on, once you've witnessed the immense need. Sligo man, Shane Burke, who went out to Kenya almost 14 years ago to work with the Jesuits, is still with us – working with JRS and serving at the moment as Acting Country Director for South Sudan. He's part of the team responding to the refugee crisis in Renk, South Sudan. We also welcome home, Cavan woman, Noelle Fitzpatrick, who dedicated four years to the role as JRS South Sudan Country Director – leading the teams in Juba, Yambio and Maban.

Richard O'Dwyer, from Marino, Dublin worked in South Sudan for 7 years, as a Jesuit missionary in Lobone and Rumbek. Not an easy feat for anyone. A world apart from this current work as Parish Priest in Gardiner Street, yet not a day would go by without Richard remembering South Sudan and the people he served. As the Jesuit parish

gets ready for their Christmas Concert, I can't help but be moved by the videos being sent to me over WhatsApp, from the Jesuit schools in South Sudan - students singing Christmas carols and teachers sending Christmas greetings - which we hope to show as the congregation settles into their seats at St Francis Xavier Church for the Christmas Concert. The sense of solidarity is humbling.

We launch our Christmas Appeal for refugees and returnees in Renk this month. As Christmas approaches, please think of the people in South Sudan. They are thinking of you.

Emer Kerrigan is Operations Manager of Irish Jesuits International. To donate to the South Sudan Emergency Response, contact Irish Jesuits International on 01 836 6509 or donate online at www.iji.ie/donate

“There are over 2 million people displaced in South Sudan – that's equivalent to all the people in Munster and Connaught living in a temporary setting that is not their home.



South Sudan Emergency Appeal

PLEASE DONATE TODAY

I want to help today. Here's my gift of:

☐ €25 ☐ €75 ☐ €250 ☐ Other amount €

I enclose a cheque/ postal order/bank draft made payable to **Irish Jesuits International**

Your Information: (please print clearly using block capitals)

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I would like my donation to go to: ☐ South Sudan Emergency Appeal ☐ Where the need is greatest

A WORD FROM OUR DIRECTOR

We enter the Advent and Christmas Season in a spirit of hope and prayer for peace in our world. Palestine, where Jesus was born, continues to experience suffering and pain. Those who are suffering the most are children and mothers – ‘The Holy Innocents.’

As we pray for peace, we remember also the people of Ukraine, Myanmar, Tigray in Northern Ethiopia, Syria, Yemen, Sudan and those places of conflict which never receive coverage in the international media.

Our Christmas newsletter is focused on reflecting on the people who have touched and impacted our lives in so many ways. I want to take this moment to thank and appreciate our friends and supporters for your continued solidarity, generosity, and kindness to those we accompany in many parts of the world in Irish Jesuits International. Your support brings peace and happiness to so many families and communities.

Emer, our Operations Manager, writes about her love of South Sudan and its enduring place on her heart. Our Christmas appeal this year is focused on refugees and families, just ordinary people like you and I, experiencing so much hardship at a time when most are safe and celebrating this festive time with loved ones. Emer shares with us the work of our partners, the

people working directly with vulnerable communities and those fleeing war and violence. Our thoughts and prayers are with the people of Sudan and South Sudan and your help makes such a positive difference in their everyday life. Clean water, shelter, food and education is what you provide through us and with us.

In his article “Memories that stay with you forever”, Kevin Carroll talks about his long connection with the Jesuit missions and reflects on the many missionaries working to alleviate the suffering of others. He speaks fondly of his companionship with the late Fr Michael J Kelly in Zambia and his tireless work to help those severely affected by HIV/AIDS and his role in championing girls’ education and women’s empowerment.

Spotlighted in our newsletter is Pascazie, a Rwandan refugee from Nairobi, Kenya. She shares with us the impact Mikono crafts has had on her life and the lives of her children. Pascazie’s story of creativity and tenacity is truly inspiring and



she shares with us the trials and tribulations and the determination to overcome setbacks and see her business thrive and grow.

Mikono crafts is a project which is about empowerment and giving refugees the tools and support to build small businesses and strengthen livelihoods. This Christmas, as well as promoting the unique and special Mikono crafts, we are proud to launch our gift catalogue which gives our readers the opportunity to give their friends and loved ones something really special – a gift that will positively impact the lives of others! From providing a struggling family with a goat to gifting a school kit to support a child’s education in Uganda.

We wish you every blessing during this Advent and Christmas Season. As we enter the New Year of 2024 may the light and peace of the Newborn accompany you and console you.

Fr John K. Guiney SJ
Director

Memories that stay with you forever

My first connection with Jesuit missionaries goes back to my time in India over 40 years ago. At the beginning of a two-year period teaching in Kolkata, I was introduced to an extraordinary man, Fr. Gerard Beckers SJ, who had been a member of the Belgian resistance movement during the Second World War, eventually joining the Jesuit Order in 1944.

He was a deeply reflective, committed Christian, a social activist who led by example, touching so many lives, not least the Indian family who, thanks to him, I came to live with. He was affectionately known as 'Babu Beckers' (respected one), easily recognisable as he travelled around the city on his bicycle in traditional Indian dress. Babu's simple lifestyle and his work with the poor left a deep impression on those of us who came to know him. As a result, I contemplated joining the Jesuit Order but after a period of serious reflection I felt called to married life. That decision however did not sever my connections with the Jesuits.

Years later, I went with my family to work in Africa where I again came into contact with Jesuit missionaries, especially the current IJI Director Fr. John Guiney who was then working in Kenya and subsequently the late Fr. Michael J Kelly in Zambia. John lived in Kangemi, a slum area in Nairobi where he supervised a very active parish development programme that included education projects and income generating activities for women. It was always inspiring and humbling for us as a family to visit John, living as we were

in far more comfortable surroundings in Nairobi. Equally, John's regular visits to our home were always welcomed by our family.

I first met the late Fr. Michael J Kelly when I went to Zambia in 1999. Michael was then Professor of Education at the University of Zambia, and we began to meet regularly in the course of my work with the Irish Aid programme there. We became good friends. On top of its existing development challenges, Zambia was then severely affected by HIV/AIDS and Michael became a very strong advocate for the role of education, especially girls' education, in combatting the disease. He was passionate, articulate and very much ahead of his time. He became an international authority on HIV/AIDS and an advisor to governments, international development agencies and non-governmental organisations.

So much has been written about Michael's many achievements during his long and very active life. He has rightfully been honoured with many awards. But for me, that doesn't tell the whole story. My abiding memories of Michael are about his spirituality, his simplicity and humility, his warmth and great affection for people. I remember well when I would visit him in Lusaka, he would often be out in the garden in animated conversation with the gardener. He was equally comfortable meeting with the President of Zambia, as he did on many occasions.

Like so many of us who knew him, I always came away feeling better every time I met him. The last time we met in person was on a visit to Zambia which coincided with his 90th birthday. I was a day late but typical of Michael he didn't cut his birthday cake until my arrival in Lusaka.



Presidential Award: Michael J. Kelly SJ, was one of the first ten recipients of the Presidential Distinguished Service Awards at Áras an Uachtaráin on 15th November 2012.

He wrote afterwards:

"My very sincere thanks to you for joining us last Tuesday evening and for the mountain of stuff you brought for me. Poor man, you must have been terribly weighed down carrying all that. I am most grateful to you for that and also for taking the heavy package for delivery through the Mission Office. I hope it won't burden you too much as you travel tomorrow night. It was really great seeing you and catching up on so many things. I don't know when I enjoyed an evening so much. I am immensely grateful to God and all those through whom God worked that I am so well and that I have lived this far. In many ways my life now revolves around gratitude and thanks".

Michael and I corresponded regularly up to the time he died. He continued to express gratitude for his life. In one of his last emails before he died, he talked about being prepared for his final journey and how he was looking forward to meeting God. Rest in Peace Michael for a life well lived.

I have been privileged throughout my working life to have witnessed the enormous contribution Irish missionaries have made and continue to make overseas. They bring an additional dimension to their work which in my view is hard to find elsewhere – leading by example,



Kevin and his family and Fr Michael Kelly, Zambia 2001

long term commitment, rooted in communities, and prepared to work in remote and often insecure environments. That is why I have been involved with the work of Irish Jesuits International.

I am reminded of the words of George Bernard Shaw who in many ways expresses the missionary ethos: *"I am of the opinion that my life belongs to the whole community and as long as I live, it is my privilege to do for it what I can. I want to be thoroughly used up when I die, for the harder I work, the more I live. I rejoice in life for its own sake. Life is no brief candle to me. It is a sort of splendid*

torch which I have got hold of for the moment and I want to make it burn as brightly as possible before handing it on to future generations."

Author: **Kevin Carroll** is a member of the Advisory Board of Irish Jesuits International. He spent most of his career working in overseas development, including with Concern, Trocaire and the Department of Foreign Affairs. Throughout his career, he has served in a number of countries in Africa and Asia. He is currently Chair of the Board of Misesan Cara.



Former Irish President Mary Robinson visiting Fr Michael Kelly in Luwisha House, Lusaka. August 2016

"My craft means the world to me"

Meet Pascazie Uwimana a refugee mother of three girls and five grandchildren from Rwanda who has lived in Nairobi, Kenya since 1997.

I am a tailor who specializes in making bags (Backpacks, shoulder bags, purses, tote, and sling bags) from African Kiteenge print and other fabric like jeans. My bags are mostly used by women and students to carry a good number of items on the go as they move from one point to another. They are stylish too! And unique!

I have been supplying my products at Mikono the refugee craft shop for five years now. Working as a supplier



for Mikono has kept me busy! And I'm happy that I can support myself as I don't have to go through the stress of begging for support from people and refugee agencies because with the sales with Mikono, I can buy food, pay rent, and cover the school fees for my children.

I have experienced a few challenges with my business like when a client requests items and you deliver but they fail to pay for them – people can be cruel and exploitative. Another challenge is that I am not always certain when the items will be paid for since we deliver our products on credit in different shops. Through Mikono crafts I don't face any of these problems and I thank God for that.

With Mikono crafts, I have hope and my life has improved despite challenges. I don't feel so alone, and the refugee craft shop is the encouragement and support I need.



I want to take this moment to thank everyone who has been supporting me by buying my products in the Mikono shop. It brings me joy to think about my designs being loved and worn far away in Ireland!

The bags I design and make give my life purpose, I love what I do and I'm so thankful that through my business I can take care of myself and my family – It means the world to me.

God bless.



Order your Mikono Gifts and Christmas cards now

If you would like to support refugees like, Pascazie, and buy some amazing and unique Christmas gifts, you can come visit the shop at our Offices or our various pop shops across the Dublin – for more details and to view our products, please get in touch with Amanda or Rosaleen on reception@iji.ie or 01 836 6509.