

Solidarity Teacher Training College, Yambio, South Sudan, 17 December 2023

To: Holy Faith Sisters

Dear Enda, Pat, Hilda and all Sisters,

I am writing this in my bedroom on a Sunday after Mass as the good smells of Elizabeth's cooking (she is from Poland) are wafting my way. It is her turn to cook today, and I am making myself sit and write a few long-delayed letters. I have been delayed in writing, sorry, but we have been in a sort of limbo since I returned at the start of October. It has been a difficult run and hard to keep track of time, but things are going to be more settled soon, we have (I think) turned the corner.

First and most importantly, I am keeping well. I have recovered well from a dose of bronchitis. Getting something that is easily diagnosed and treated is OK here as there is no shortage of medicines (just no doctor or hospital, but there is a clinic where a young man will sell you anything – and I mean that!). Your health is surely your wealth here and I thank God each day for having a robust constitution.

Our best news is the arrival a few days ago of a new member, Sr Sherly, from India, a science teacher and a real treasure. What we might call 'a good community sister' and full of fun and energy. She is aged 56, spent years on mission in different parts of India and most recently was in Iraq (not easy). Before she travelled out here, she was given a short sabbatical break – which she promptly spent in their own Teacher Training Institute in India to prepare herself for here. So, you can imagine my delight. We have already started plans to work with the college in India on some particular areas – being foundation level students (basic entry) I can already see, from their curriculum, some things that we could adapt for here. Simple maybe, and might seem obvious, but you know how much it means to have tried and tested models to inspire your own efforts. Tomorrow Sherly will tackle the glory hole that is the science store room; in this tropical climate she will find much to interest her (her PhD is in zoology). Spiders, lizards and other creatures who have been undisturbed for months (years?) are about to be moved out. I am doing the same job in the 'back library store' (a larger glory hole) so we can compare notes.

There are four of us here in Yambio right now – Chris, the principal (India), Elizabeth, the administrator or bursar (from Poland), Sherly (India), and myself. The fourth member, Guille is on a visit to her home in Peru. There are no staff or students. As some of you know already, I arrived back in early October to find the tutors and workers were on strike. They were set up by probably 3 of the tutors who expected the college to give in to demands no matter how crazy. There was also intimidation – and violence is too close here. The staff were asked to go back to work by everybody – the Ministry of Labour, the Ministry of Education in Yambio and in Juba, the parish priest, the bishop, the university, the principal and finally (on the day I arrived back) by the Solidarity college board who had flown in (at great

expense) to meet them in Yambio over two days. No surrender. The board then decided to suspend all activities in the college. This meant there was no work for anybody and all contracts would be terminated. (No staff meant no classes and all donor funding ceased). A total of 31 staff are now without their permanent, well-paid jobs (for South Sudan) that were guaranteed into the foreseeable future. These include five tutors (South Sudanese) recently returned from four-year university scholarships in Nairobi (paid by Solidarity) whom we expected to lead the college into the future. Most of the staff have now received their final payment and benefits; the last eight are disputing 'unfair termination' (backed by an official in the local Ministry of Labour) - you can see how this has dragged on and on, and how unsettling it all is. The students were sent to their homes (at great trouble and expense) and will be called back when we re-open (excepting those few, very few, who gave us trouble during the strike. Most of the students were bewildered and frightened to say anything). Chris and Elizabeth are handling all the staff matters (with the director Fr Jim and the lawyer and accountant in Juba); I am the fortunate person with charge of academic affairs and nobody has any trouble with this. My main job throughout all this has been to try and support (not interfere), and help out – as we have no cooks, cleaners, gardeners or any other workers, you can be sure there is lots to do. It is a large campus. Sherly has arrived like a breath of fresh air, with no involvement in this but much experience of complex situations and able to think ahead to the re-opening. That is where the store-room cleaning etc., comes in, you could not do anything during term when things are full-on (24/7).

Though this was in nobody's plan, good will come of this (eventually), I am certain. You can see ahead already, as we will be free to employ new workers with new contracts. We are getting the place ready to hand over to local management (under the bishops' conference); this forces us to bring forward changes that will make the place sustainable. We need fewer workers but more flexible – for example, cooks who might also wash the tea cloths and clean the kitchen, not just stir the pot! The morning the college was closed, twenty women arrived at the gate seeking work and once we advertise I am sure there will be hundreds.

Elizabeth (Poland) is the most positive and energetic about the crisis. We still do not know how long classes will be suspended (possibly to March, but only a guess) – but she decided immediately to use the time to do multiple repairs and improvement jobs that can only be done when the rooms are empty. Money from Ireland (HF sisters, Maynooth friends, Prunty family) – small and big sums that add up to quite a lot – has already re-floored the Library and made extra bookshelves, painted the perimeter wall of the college (inside and out), provided dictionaries, and done numerous other good things. Right now Elizabeth (the best finance officer and quantity surveyor I have ever known), is working with small teams of men, paid on a day-by-day labouring basis, buying all the building materials herself and whatever extra tools are needed, to work her way across the college. The donations I brought back are being used directly for all this (the main donors who pay the feeding and staff costs have suspended funding while there are no classes. The outside money is allowing us to do

things that would not be possible otherwise). The quality of the building work the first time was poor so there is cement to be re-done before it can be painted (three or four layers). Each classroom, office, dormitory, every inch of the college, is getting the once-over – broken tiles replaced, holes filled in, new skirting boards (from cut tiles), desks and chairs sanded and varnished, full painting and (finally), new curtains on proper curtain rods. The girls' yard to the toilets has been given 'crazy paving' with the broken tiles from the old floor in the library. The staff sit-out area got the same treatment and the dirty path that crosses to the library – all transformed. The computer room is now getting tiled, and the classroom doors a fresh coat of paint. I myself have spent five long days with a young man called Ema who aspires to be a plumber. Together we have worked on 13 toilets in the community and visitor bedrooms, and for the first time since I came, there are no leaks or floods. He replaced the waste pipe in my own toilet and it is a great job. The toilet itself is now at a definite tilt, solidly cemented so no chance of revision, but I am not complaining! Few people here have seen a spirit level.

While this refurbishment work is going on with day workers, the building of two new classrooms and an office advances every day. It is now roofed (tin sheets, bright blue) and the interior plastering is progressing rapidly. All will be ready for occupation by the time we resume. Just seeing the building move ahead each day, with maybe 20 men working on it, would lift your spirits. These men keep the compound alive and they are also good company (and security – the builder supplies two watchmen for each night so we are well minded).

I started by telling you that we were closed, temporarily, with no students or staff. It would be truer to say that we are in the middle of a building site, with action on all sides. When tutors removed their personal property from the offices, I found myself with the emptying and sorting, a huge task in itself. But we see this as a job for the future, and badly needed to be done. The college is in existence for I think 15 years (it started in Malakal, then was in Riimenze, and finally came to Yambio) – and all sorts of rubbish has piled up, along with valuable teaching materials and books that nobody probably knows we have. So, my training as a librarian and archivist, on top of the excellent training I got in Holy Faith (and Glasilawn Guest House), makes me see the value of getting stuck in and doing this with a good spirit. It was not what I expected to come back to, but it is the present reality, and will help set up the college for the future. The sorting of the teaching materials, stationery, sewing materials etc., and making 'departments' for the different subject areas (for the first time) will make it easier to guide the new tutors – the new contracts will put them in charge of managing materials, caring for the books, keeping the offices organised, etc., not just go into class and teach.

Sorry, I seem to be giving an update on scraping and cleaning, and that is certainly true, but not the only thing. Chris is revising the school policies, manuals, contracts, etc., and we are all involved in reviewing these documents. My biggest job, by far, continues to be the writing of the programmes (Certificate, Diploma) and textbooks (to match the programmes) and getting all printed and bound

here in the college. I return to this exclusively right after our Solidarity assembly (from 28 Dec to 2 Jan, in Juba), that will be the top priority. Having Sherly to go through the Science is a huge help. In this mission, there are so many openings, no matter what you are interested in or able to help with will be welcome!

I think I have given you more than you can take in one letter. Sorry. We are looking ahead to Christmas now – here it is primarily a religious feastday still. There is none of the hype and the pressure to spend that you see in Dublin and many other places. As you can well imagine, that suits me perfectly. I think others would be tempted to move here to escape all that if they only realised!

This is not yet a Christmas letter, I am not yet that far ahead in my mind. I know I have lots of prayer and support from home, from Holy Faith, family and friends, and it is very much appreciated. Thanks to those who emailed though did not get a reply (sorry). This is not an easy country and the people have been kept down through fear (and ignorance). But I have given my heart here, for the present. I thank Holy Faith for the wonderful privilege of being part of the good things that are happening for the future of South Sudan.

The family update is that Mam celebrated her 92nd birthday on 2 December in style (afternoon tea in the Marine Hotel, Dun Laoghaire, for the hordes of Prunty children, grandchildren, other relatives, neighbours and more). Since then she has had a setback, and is currently in hospital being treated for pneumonia. I hear that she has rallied, and know that between all the siblings she is very well minded. But it is a worry. I will get to see her in the first months of 2024, no dates booked yet but I will not be leaving it too long. I do think that Dad RIP is looking out for me – he would certainly approve of all the scraping and sweeping and patching up I am involved in right now, real work that gives results you can see!

I had better hold it at that, and get to bed. I completed this letter late on Sunday night, with fresh banana cake cooling beside me. Elizabeth is a great cook and we certainly have bananas to spare here – and other lovely fruits also. We are here for each other – the community end is vital to the mission here, we really do hang together.

For now, God bless, and love to all,



Jacinta Prunty