

Small Christian Communities (SCCs) Accompany Young Couples in Don Bosco Parish, Tonj, South Sudan

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I have researched the tradition of marriage in South Sudan and the challenge of Small Christian Communities (SCCs) accompanying young couples in Don Bosco Parish, Tonj in Rumbek Diocese. I have compared the marriage traditions of the Dinka Ethnic Group (polygamy law) and the teaching of the Catholic Church. SCC members can be very useful to help young couples sacramentalize their marriages.

I. The Mission of Don Bosco Parish, Tonj, South Sudan

The town of Tonj is located in Tonj South in northwest South Sudan in Rumbek Catholic Diocese. Its location lies approximately 525 kilometers (326 miles) by road northwest of Juba, the capital and largest city in the country. Tonj lies between Rumbek, approximately 153 kilometers (95 miles) by road to the southeast, and Wau approximately 108 kilometers (67 miles) by road to the northwest¹.

We know that the main ethnic group at Tonj is Dinka. The Dinka is one of the branches of the River Lake Nilotes. Though known for centuries as Dinka people, they actually call themselves Jieng (Upper Nile) or Muonyjang (Bahr el Ghazal) "People of the People." The Dinka is the largest single national grouping in South Sudan. Numbering about 2.5 to 3 million and constituting more than 25 aggregates of different Dinka sections (Wut). The Dinka people still live near the hot and humid homeland of the River-Lake Nilotes. The Dinka groups retain the traditional pastoral life of the Nilotes. Women do most of the agriculture, but men clear forests for the gardening sites².

Salesians came to Sudan in 1979 and since then have set up institutions in Khartoum, El Obeid, Wau and Tonj. These institutions include Vocational Training Centers, formal schools and primary schools in the villages. It is a well-recognized fact that all these institutions offer a service that is relevant as well as of a high quality³. They work in an area spread over a territory containing 120 villages where they are involved in an intense activity of evangelization which in recent years, as a result of the war, the famine and the floods, has often been greatly hampered. They go out to various villages to help the people with games, education and Christian formation. The schools are also used as mission stations for catechesis and Sunday Mass. When

¹ Nautical Distance Between Juba And Tonj With Map & Distance Marker; Map Showing Tonj And Rumbek With Distance Marker; Road Distance Between Tonj And Wau.

² "Kiir pressured into taking decree to Parliament for approval."

³ The magazine for the Salesian family, *Don Bosco Today*, the Salesian Bulletin year 114, issue 3, Autumn 2006, p. 14.

the rainy season prevents them reaching the villages, the teacher-catechists devote their time to the youngsters in Tonj⁴.

Small Christian Communities (SCCs) were introduced in Sudan 1973. This is the new way for the evangelization of the church in Africa. In Tonj Parish the parish priest wanted to study how this new model could develop in the new parish. Therefore, SCCs were introduced in Tonj Parish. From the beginning, the first group of SCC was about 15 people. They consisted of different people -- parish priest, religious, laity, elders, young people, the secondary school students. That is why from the beginning SCC activities got some difficulties. They had less experience, less education, less basic of knowledge about the obligation of the SCC activities. Later, SCC activities become better and the SCC members improved. Slowly, from the first SCC members, they created some other new groups such as YSCCs. Their activities also become successful and useful to help the people of God in Tonj Parish. Through the SCCs' activities they opened classes to share and reflect on the holy Gospel, study catechism, visit the poor and sick and counsel young couples trying to follow the teaching of the church.

I would like to give a short introduction about the source of SCCs. Its source is AMECEA that is an acronym for "Association of Member Episcopal Conferences in Eastern Africa." It is a service organization for the National Episcopal Conferences of the nine English-speaking countries of Eastern Africa, namely Eritrea (1993), Ethiopia (1979), Kenya (1961), Malawi (1961), South Sudan (2011), Sudan (1973), Tanzania (1961), Uganda (1961) and Zambia (1961). The Republic of South Sudan became independent on 9 July, 2011. Somalia (1995) and Djibouti (2002) are Affiliate Members. The purpose of AMECEA is deeper evangelization, formation and education, and church life, organization and structure. This is the source of SCCs. That are useful for the evangelization of Tonj Parish, especially to help for the young couples here.⁵

II. The Traditional Marriage of the Dinka Ethnic Group in Tonj

We know that marriage is obligatory among the Dinka. Polygamy is allowed among the Dinka, though many men may have only one wife. The Dinka must marry outside their clan (exogamy) which promotes more cohesion across the broader Dinka group. So, the requirement of Dinka traditional marriage is the "bridewealth" paid by the groom's family to finalize the marriage alliance between the two clan families. Especially, the chief's daughters fetch more cattle in the same way that chief's son is expected to pay more cattle for his wife. University graduates fetch higher more bride prices. After a Dinka boy was accepted in his initiation in the society by test, he will be given an ox. Every Dinka male is given an ox by his father, uncle or whoever is responsible for him. The initiation scars mean that a man is able to marry and now begins to court eligible girls. That issue meant he was given in marriage by the father⁶.

⁴ The magazine for the Salesian family, *Don Bosco Today*, the Salesian Bulletin year 114, issue 3, Autumn 2006, p. 15.

⁵ Joseph G. Healey, MM, *Building the Church as Family of God: Evaluation of Small Christian Communities in Eastern Africa*, AMECEA Gaba Publications – CUEA Press, 2016.

⁶ Ryle, John. *Warriors of the White Nile*. Amsterdam, The Netherlands: Time-Life Books, 1982.

However, like other Nilotics, sex among the Dinka is only for social reproduction. Thus, fornication is prohibited, adulterers are despised and heavily fined. Sometimes this may be source of conflict and clan fighting. Incest is usually unimaginable and indeed abhorred.

III. The Challenge of Young Couples in Don Bosco Parish

The difficult situation of young women in Tonj is that some cultural traditions like polygamy are still practiced in the villages. For the family or the clan, the girl is a means of wealth because she receives the dowry from the boy who wants to marry her. The family takes care of their daughters until they reach marriageable age, without however sending them to school but only to guarantee the dowry coming from their marriage. The girl has no choice in the marriage because sometime some girls of 14 or 15 are given as a wife to men of 60 or 70 years who already have many wives. Otherwise, tradition demands that if the husband dies, his wife must continue to bear children to him by marrying the brother of the deceased. She must also assume the responsibility of raising them on her own without receiving help from others, not even from the brother-in-law who already has other wives⁷.

We can see that the traditional marriage and the culture of the Dinka Ethnic Group (polygamy) are different from other ethnic groups. Also, it is different way from the teaching of the Catholic Church about the marriage sacrament. This cultural issue makes Dinka women to live in unhappiness, sorrow, hard work. This also makes pastors who are missionaries and serve the People of God in Don Bosco Parish, Tonj get difficulties especially the challenge of the marriage sacrament.

Some Religious Sisters who are members of SCCs had experiences while serving here many years ago. They shared that they encouraged the education of girls, offering them a place to live in the boarding school. This was not easy since they had to separate the girls from their families for a while in order to educate them. However, with the help and assistance of members of the SCCs, they helped the girls to live their lives better. This gave the girls a chance to complete their studies and also to avoid matrimony at a very young age. The girls could study, to better their condition and eventually that of their family.

Moreover, SCCs' activities started life-skills of the program formation, providing lessons in hygiene and various manual activities to help them get a job. In addition to this, SCCs also offered the girl the opportunity to learn the importance of cultivating local produce in order to ensure their own nutrition requirements and that of their children⁸.

In relation to the traditions of the Dinka (polygamy) to save young girls who are living in their villages, SCCs also suggested some good ways to help the young girl. They tried to make good on its pledges of gender equality by putting human rights of women and girls at the heart of its development agenda.

⁷ The magazine for the Salesian family, *Don Bosco Today*, the Salesian Bulletin year 114, issue 3, Autumn 2006, p. 16.

⁸ The magazine for the Salesian family, *Don Bosco Today*, the Salesian Bulletin year 114, issue 3, Autumn 2006, p. 17.

Girls and women interviewed said that their dreams of continuing school to become accountants, teachers or doctors were cut short when they married. Those who dropped out of school found it difficult to continue schooling after marriage or after becoming pregnant.

SCCs cooperate with the government to improve the education, health, security, and economic progress of women and girls, their families, and their communities in relation to the tradition and the culture. SCCs try to develop and implement a comprehensive national action plan to prevent and address the consequences of child marriage or develop and implement guidelines on how national and state level government ministries and agencies should handle child marriage cases. SCCs help women and girls to follow the legal rights of girls under the child act, particularly their right to be protected from child marriage.

SCCs acted toward comprehensive reform of South Sudan's laws on marriage. They take programmatic and policy measures to ensure that girls and women who seek help to fight forced marriages can receive it. The SCCs' plan taught the people, especially the young people in Don Bosco Parish, Tonj day by day, to understand more about the teaching of the church in faith and love. The SCCs' assistance helped the young people understand the value of the marriage sacrament and the value of a couple's life (a man and a woman). The young women changed their lives, their thinking and made their lives better for themselves. Moreover, they also got good lessons through the class of catechisms and seminars of SCCs in Tonj Parish.

IV. Conclusion

So, we can see that the SCCs' challenge, through the heart of missionaries in faith and love who are the servants of God. SCCs have evangelized the good news to the People of God in Don Bosco Parish, Tonj. We believe in God's activity. Members of SCCs are only the instruments of God. They have brought useful things to the people in this parish. Especially SCCs' activities are very important to help the marriage sacrament of young couples and to help them know how to follow the teaching of the Catholic Church.

I would like to return to the catechism of the Catholic Church that the vocation to marriage is written in the very nature of man and woman as they came from the hand of the Creator (1603). Holy Scripture affirms that a man and a woman were created for one another: "It is not good that the man should be alone." The woman, "flesh of his flesh," i.e. his counterpart, his equal, his nearest in all things, is given to him by God as a "helpmate"; she thus represents God from whom comes our help (1605). This is what the Apostle Paul makes clear when he says: "Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her," adding at once: "For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one. This is a great mystery, and I mean in reference to Christ and the church" (1616).

This is most important for the SCCs' obligation to serve the People of God and especially the young couples in Don Bosco Parish, Tonj. The SCCs' activities help them to know the value

of marriage when they accept the guidelines of marriage in the Catholic Church: “a man and a woman establish between themselves a partnership of the whole of life” (1601)⁹.

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⁹ *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Paulines Publication Africa, 1995, pp. 358-362.