

Rumbek Girls Walk for Peace

Rumbek in South Sudan is the newest outreach of the Loreto Sisters. Led by Sr Orla Treacy IBVM of Bray, they opened the first school for women in South Sudan. They describe their latest venture – a pilgrimage for peace in a country that has experienced war and violence.

Last year, a colourful group of students from our secondary school, together with other young people from the diocese, our bishop, and some priests and religious, went on a pilgrimage to Juba to greet the Pope. Through their pilgrimage and prayers, they expressed their desire for peace and simultaneously practised this peace together during these days.

On their return, the young people met every two months at their request to pray, talk, eat and sing together. And the desire for another pilgrimage quickly arose. The group chose a small group from among themselves to organise this new tour. This time, the route was to travel through the Diocese of Rumbek to bring young people in the parishes into contact with each other and promote peace here.

Pope Francis's speech to the young people in South Sudan accompanied us on our journey. 'Be seeds of hope' was the motto.

On Saturday, 6 January 2024, the time finally came. Eighty young people from the seventeen parishes of the diocese met with the bishop, some priests, and religious in Loreto Rumbek to set off together on Sunday morning. Around 125 km on foot, from Rumbek north-westwards to Tonj, lay ahead of us. Most of the time, we walked along the main dusty road, past many small settlements and sometimes single file through the bush.

The daily distances varied from 27 km to 16 km. Setting off at dawn, we usually arrived at our destinations around midday and were greeted with cheering, singing and dancing. People generously brought their chairs, sometimes even their beds and mattresses, so that we could rest.

In almost every village, the local community presented us with a cow, a goat or a chicken, which we ate in the evening. The afternoon was spent unloading the luggage from the accompanying vehicles, cooking, eating and meeting more local people, as well as discussion groups, Mass and an evening reflection session.



Pope Francis's speech to the young people in South Sudan accompanied us on our journey. 'Be seeds of hope' was the motto. We reflected on what it means for young people in South Sudan to be salt of the earth and light of the world, and we allowed ourselves to be guided by texts from the Scriptures and Francis's words towards a deeper understanding of prayer and discipleship.

The topic of vocation was also met with great interest; in the culture of the Dinka, it is almost inconceivable to decide in favour of a life beyond the traditional extended family, and those who feel God's call within them have to fight hard for this path here. The youth had many questions about this issue.

When we arrived in Tonj on Saturday, despite all the tiredness and numerous blisters on our feet, we were full of gratitude for this experience of community and for the outstanding

commitment and responsibility with which the young people carried out their tasks day after day, making this tour possible in the first place. Conversations had already begun about next year's pilgrimage, where it would be and who would be going. The young people, strengthened by the spiritual experiences of these days, wished they could add more prayer experiences to the next programme; these include bible sharing, the rosary and more silence.

This year's peace pilgrimage ended on Sunday with the diocesan opening Mass of the Eucharistic Congress. The one-year Eucharistic Congress aims to strengthen the unity of Christians among themselves and between the states of Sudan and South Sudan.

After the Mass, it was time for us to say goodbye, and with heavy hearts we all set off in different directions, with the mutual assurance that we would stay in contact with each other.