

# Keeping Hope Alive

Carla Bellone, of the Jesuit Curia in Rome, interviews Sr Orla Treacy CJ.

Hidden in some of the world's most fragile places are missionaries whose courage, compassion and quiet perseverance reveal the face of Christ. One of them is Sr Orla Treacy, an Irish religious sister of the Loreto Order. She has spent nearly two decades serving in South Sudan. In this conversation, she reflects on her vocation, the struggles and graces of missionary life and the hope that continues to take root among the women and young people she accompanies.

*Sr Orla, thank you for taking the time to speak with us today. Could you begin by telling us about your vocation and the path that led you to your current mission in South Sudan?*

I'm Irish, a member of the Loreto Sisters. After completing my university studies, I felt a deep calling to religious life. In 2003, I entered the congregation, although I was fairly certain I did not want to be a missionary. Then, in 2006, I travelled with some sisters to South Sudan, responding to the bishop's invitation to open a girls' boarding secondary school. We arrived in a country emerging from



twenty years of civil war. There was not even primary education for girls. It was daunting, but I felt drawn to it. I thought I would stay five years and I'm still here nearly twenty years later.

*When you arrived, there was almost nothing. How did you manage to live the contemplative dimension within such intense activity?*

The early years were extremely hard. We faced illness, isolation and constant challenges. I remember sitting before the cross at night, weeping, asking God for strength. Then a Jesuit priest told me, 'Where there is suffering, there is the cross, and where there is the cross, there is Jesus.' Those words have carried me through every hardship. Each day I try to give thanks for something small. Sometimes it's just a good cup



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tried to help her but were too late. That experience opened my eyes to the deep injustices faced by young women. Since then, we've established protocols to protect them. Parents must sign an agreement ensuring their daughters remain in school until graduation. Some girls live with us for months, unable to return home safely. Over time, our boarding school became a refuge for girls escaping forced marriage. Families sometimes oppose us, but we've also seen remarkable change – many of our graduates are now supporting and protecting younger students.

of tea that keeps me going.

*How important has community support – both religious and lay – been for you?*

It's been essential. In a place like this, community means survival. Peaceful relationships matter more than any structure or project. Over time, we've learned to build a community that includes not just the sisters but also lay people, staff and our former students. A few years ago, several graduates invited us to open a new mission ten hours away. They now live and work alongside one of our sisters.

*Could you share a powerful experience from your years of mission?*

In 2013, one of our students, Rebecca, was forced into marriage. We

*What message would you share with women – religious and lay – who serve quietly in the shadows?*

I would remind them that the Church is not only about sacraments; it is the people we accompany – the women, the youth, the wounded, the burdened. We never walk alone. The people we serve carry a deep wisdom of their own, even if they don't share our language or education. Listening to them and journeying alongside them has made me a better person and a better missionary. No matter how dark things seem, keep hope alive – find small moments of gratitude each day.