

MARYKNOLL HISTORY IN AFRICA
PART THREE
EL OBEID DIOCESE, SUDAN

As was noted previously in Part Two, Maryknoll had worked in southern Sudan, in Juba, from 1976 to the beginning of 1984, when Fr Jack Quinn moved to Nairobi. In 1983 Frs. Bill Knipe and Joe Glynn had finished up in Juba, the former to work for Maryknoll in the U.S. and the latter to become Kenya Regional Superior. However, neither Knipe nor Glynn gave up hope of returning to Sudan at some time in the future, and Knipe in particular kept up his knowledge of Arabic even in the U.S.

Glynn began work as Kenya Regional Superior on October 1, 1983, and for the next six to nine months he had to devote attention to regional matters in Kenya. He began correspondence, however, with Bishop Macram Max Gassis, a member of the Comboni Missionary Society and the newly appointed Bishop of El Obeid Diocese in northern Sudan. (Everyone calls him Macram Max and in this history he will be referred to as Bishop Macram Max.) The Bishop was hoping that Maryknoll would look for other personnel to send to El Obeid, which was also Glynn's desire.

In mid-1984 Glynn suffered a mini-stroke and had to depart the Region for about six months, handing over temporary authority to Assistant Regional Tom Burke. It was not until 1985 that Glynn recovered enough health and strength to resume duties as Regional Superior. Even then the issue was raised at the Kenya Regional Assembly in January, 1985, whether Glynn should continue or resign as Regional. He stated that he would abide by the wishes of the regional membership, which voted well over fifty percent in support of his continuance. As the months went on in 1985, Glynn regained his strength and intellectual acumen, muting any further calls for his resignation. Likewise, he resumed his correspondence with Bishop Macram Max in earnest.

At the Maryknoll Area Meeting in 1985, a meeting of the area coordinators and regional council members of both Kenya and Tanzania, it was decided that Glynn and Fr. Dave Schwinghamer, the Area Coordinator who was stationed in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, would visit two dioceses in Sudan that looked most promising, Torit in the south, a new diocese that had just been started in 1983, and El Obeid in the north. After the trip they wrote a report recommending El Obeid Diocese. In 1986 a call was put out to the membership of both Tanzania and Kenya for volunteers to go to Sudan the following year.

In October, 1986, both Kenya and Tanzania got new Regional Superiors, John Conway in Kenya and Ed Hayes in Tanzania, and a month or two later they visited Bishop Macram Max in El Obeid and had him take them out to see the places where he wished Maryknoll to work. They approved of these places, which were Babanusa, a town on one of the major rail lines going west, about 270 miles southwest of El Obeid, and at the diocesan headquarters of El Obeid itself.

Five Maryknollers, all with extensive experience in East Africa, volunteered to go to Sudan. Three of them were to first study Arabic for two years, both the classical, written form of Arabic and the colloquial form spoken in Sudan. These were Frs. Tom Tiscornia and Dick Baker, who were working in Tanzania (Musoma Diocese), and Fr. Joe Morris, who was just finishing up work in Lodwar Diocese of northern Kenya and who had been tentatively assigned to promotion work for Maryknoll in the United States.

Assignment to Sudan replaced the promotion assignment. The other two Maryknollers had previously worked in Juba, Glynn himself and Bill Knipe, who decided that his assignment at the Mission Research and Planning Department (MRPD) was not essential. Knipe already knew Arabic and it was decided that Glynn, because of his age, would not try to study this language. The latter two went directly to the town of El Obeid in February, 1987, whereas Baker, Morris and Tiscornia went to the town of En Nahud to begin study of Arabic.

Knipe worked for MRPD for only three years, shorter than was originally envisioned. Although not directly connected to the history of Maryknoll in East Africa, his comments on the demise of this department, seen as so crucial by the 1972 Maryknoll Chapter, are worth noting.

I had a great crew in this department, including my secretary Pat Healy, and enjoyed the first two to three years in this work. I traveled to many of our regions in all parts of the world and got to really see our Society. But in the last year, by the beginning of 1986, I began to find the work boring. I saw that there wasn't very much will in the missions for research and planning. Rather, there was much resistance. Our personnel didn't want to follow the formats of handing in their plans and they didn't seem to be very interested in intellectual research about culture and behavior. So, I was glad to get out of there in 1987.

The Society could not find anyone to replace me and after I left no one was ever assigned to be Director of this office. I gave a list of fourteen names of those I thought would make good Directors to Fr. Ralph Davila, who was the liaison on the General Council, but when asked all fourteen of them turned down the request. Fr. Mike McKenna had left Maryknoll to get married and other researchers in the office had also left. So, after I went to Sudan Fr. Larry Vaughn, who had another job, did some things in the MRPD office, but as a side line. Pat Healy took a job at the General Council secretariat. The only other one there was Fr. Gene Higgins, in the MOES department.

So, there's much to be said and studied about the dropping of mission research and planning. It should be associated with the dropping of the Maryknoll mission diaries – a terrible thing, in my opinion – which meant that we had no more contact with what was happening in the missions around the world. This was very different than the 1960s, when people were leaving the priesthood to get married. This marked a subtle change in the Society in terms of attitudes. A lot of things gradually happened over the years that robbed Maryknoll of much of its vitality.

These things that were happening, although not fully acknowledged by Maryknoll until the Chapter of 1990, were the precipitous decline in priestly vocations in the United States, not only for religious orders but also among diocesan priests, along with a concomitant rise in the median age of Maryknollers, a Society which recruits only Americans. In the year 1970 the median age of Maryknollers was probably under fifty, maybe even in the low forties, whereas by 1992 the median age was around sixty-five to seventy. If fifty to seventy percent of missionaries in Maryknoll's various Regions were

over the age of sixty there was naturally going to be little enthusiasm for innovative mission challenges and methods.

In 1986, however, there were still Maryknollers young enough (i.e. under age fifty) and willing to go to new, non-Christian, challenging places. El Obeid Diocese definitely fits this characterization. It is a huge diocese territorially, incorporating all of what was then northwestern Sudan. (Today it is one of only two dioceses in what remains of the former northern Sudan.) The diocese covers five large States, which have a total of fifteen Provinces. [In the 1980s what were then called Provinces are now called States, and what were then called States are now called Provinces. As a result, in this history South and North Kordofan will be called Provinces, although today they are called States.) Most of the area is dry and hot, and sparsely populated. In most places almost all the population are Muslim, with just a few exceptions such as the Nuba Hills, which are ethnically Nilotic and attracted to Christianity. It should be noted, though, that the Muslims of this diocese are African Muslims, in contrast to those of Khartoum and along the Nile River who consider themselves Arab Muslims. The five Maryknollers were about to spend the next seven years living in at least four towns that were all close to one hundred percent Muslim, yet all said they had no problem with the African Muslims and that furthermore they established very close, warm relations with many of them. The problems and harassment they were to experience came solely from the militantly Islamic Khartoum government, especially after the military coup of June 30, 1989, which not only tried to impose a fundamentalist version of Islam on the whole country but also Arabic culture. These efforts were resisted not only by the Christianized African peoples of the south, but also by the non-Arabic African Muslims of the west, north and east.

El Obeid was not a new diocese but also not a particularly old diocese either. It had been established as a Vicariate Apostolic under the Comboni Missioners in 1960 and then raised to a diocese in 1974. From 1974 to 1983, Paolino Lukudu Loro, the current Archbishop of Juba, was Bishop of El Obeid, and was succeeded by Bishop Macram Max in 1984. Both are native Sudanese but also members of the Comboni Missionary Society. Macram Max is unusual, in that he is of Arab ethnicity, or at least part Arab. There are very few native Arabs who are Christian. In the early 1990s, due to death threats against him, Macram Max had to flee from Sudan, living in Europe, America and finally in Nairobi, Kenya, where he is currently based. In 1992 an Italian Comboni, Antonio Menegazzo, was named Apostolic Administrator of El Obeid and then Bishop in 1996. But due to fighting in the Nuba Hills Menegazzo was unable to travel there nor in any way to administer pastorally the parishes in Nuba. These remained under the administration of Bishop Macram Max, who continues to do this from his base in Nairobi. (Even after the establishment of independence of the new country of South Sudan in July, 2011, military conflict has continued in the Nuban Hills.)

There were only nine parishes in this huge diocese in 1986, a number that has grown to only thirteen in 2011, of which several, primarily in Nuba, are either closed or unstaffed. According to the statistics of 2004, there were a total of nine million people living in the territory of El Obeid Diocese, of whom only 143,000, about 1.5%, were Catholics, the lowest percentage of all the nine dioceses of the former Sudan. Many of the Catholics, such as in El Obeid town for example, are people who have migrated from the south looking for work. Larger numbers of indigenous Catholics are found in the parishes in Nuba and the towns bordering the south, such as Abyei.

The Sudan to which the Maryknollers were going at the beginning of 1987 was very different than that which the first group encountered from 1976 to 1983. In May, 1969, Colonel Gaafar Muhammad Nimeiri had seized power in a military coup and proclaimed Sudan a socialist rather than an Islamist nation. He began fashioning a new policy of reaching out to the south, to try to address its concerns. A short while later Communist members of the government, ostensibly Nimeiri supporters, tried to overthrow him in another coup, which failed. In return Nimeiri engaged in a massive purge of communists. Having alienated both Islamists and Communists, Nimeiri turned to the south as a way of expanding his limited power base. He signed peace agreements with both Ethiopia and Uganda and in 1972 he signed the famous Addis Ababa agreement with the SPLA rebels of southern Sudan, ending the first nearly two decades-long civil war and granting the South a fair share of autonomy. Southern support in turn helped him put down two coup attempts. As a result, between the years 1972 and 1983, when the first group of Maryknollers were in Sudan, there was no civil war.

However, the secular and Islamic political parties of the north did not support the Addis Ababa agreement. As the years went on, Nimeiri gradually came to the realization that he needed these parties more than support from the south. The turning point was in 1979, when Chevron discovered huge quantities of oil in the southern provinces. Pressure in the north built to abrogate provisions in the Addis Ababa treaty that granted financial autonomy to the south. Finally, in 1983 Nimeiri abolished the Southern region, declared Arabic the official language of the South (instead of English), and transferred control of southern armed forces to the central government. This was in effect a unilateral abrogation of the 1972 peace treaty. Civil war began again in January, 1983, when southern soldiers mutinied rather than follow orders transferring them to the north. Later in 1983 further Islamic laws, drawn from the Sharia, were promulgated, such as amputations for theft and lashings for alcohol possession. (Several years later an Italian Comboni Brother was publicly whipped for having several cartons of altar wine stored in his house.)

Despite these attempts to maintain power Nimeiry continued to lose standing in the north, due to worsening economic conditions in the country, his support for Egypt's signing of the Camp David accords in 1979, the dismissal of his cabinet and his closure of universities in an attempt to quell opposition. Finally in April, 1985, while Nimeiry was out of the country, he was overthrown in a coup led by General Abdul Rahman Suwar al-Dahab. Nimeiry was offered asylum in Egypt where he continued to reside for many years afterward. The new government suspended the 1983 constitution and disbanded Nimeiry's Sudan Socialist Union party.

Elections were held in April, 1986, and a civilian government took over led by Sadiq al-Mahdi, a descendent of the Mahdi ("the guided one," or the "expected one"), a religious and nationalist leader of the 19th century who fought a war that was successful at first against Anglo-Egyptian rule of Sudan. His aims were to expel foreign rule and to purify Islam in Sudan. His followers took on the name "Ansars," a name they still use. The Mahdi (his actual name was Muhammad Ahmad) formed a political party called the Umma Party, an important Arabic and Muslim word referring to the well-being of all Muslims seen as a pan-Islamic collectivity. In 1986 Sadiq al-Mahdi was the leader of this

same Umma Party, although his government was a coalition that included the Democratic Unionist Party, the National Islamic Front and several other small parties.

Al-Mahdi made several overtures to the south to try to end the civil war, but was never able to end the conflict. His rule was deemed ineffectual and not sufficiently Islamic, despite his solid Islamic credentials as a descendant of the 19th century Mahdi. On June 30, 1989, he was overthrown in a bloodless coup by the National Islamic Front (NIF) led by General Omar Ahmed al-Bashir, who instituted a military government. Bashir's government, ideologically spearheaded by Hassan Al-Turabi, a Muslim fundamentalist cleric who was the leader of the NIF but who preferred to stay in the background, was uncompromising with regard to Muslim Sharia law and rejected negotiations to end the civil war with the south. The war intensified and continued up till a truce was agreed to in October, 2002, followed by a deeper accord signed in September, 2003, calling for cessation of hostilities and withdrawal of northern troops from the south. Finally, the full peace treaty was signed in Kenya in January, 2005.

The civil war with the south resulted in four million displaced southerners (out of about nine or ten million total population), two million deaths, mostly from war-related starvation and disease, numerous human rights violations, including widespread slavery and forced labor, and deliberate military actions aimed at ethnic cleansing in the south. Young Southerners became known as the 'lost generation,' lacking education, secure homes, land and economic opportunities. The war crippled the economy in the south, as the north took over and benefited solely from production and export of oil.

Furthermore, under al-Bashir Sudan gave safe haven to nascent international terrorist groups, particularly Al Qaeda led by Osama bin Laden, who lived in Khartoum from 1992 to 1996. It was during these years in Khartoum that most of the planning of the bombing of the American embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam took place. As if unending war in the south were not enough, in 2003 Bashir initiated war against rebellious African Muslim tribes in Darfur, which were led by opposition political parties. The war in Darfur resulted in a further two million displaced Sudanese and caused hundreds of thousands of deaths. In July, 2008, Bashir was indicted by the International Criminal Court of crimes against humanity and war crimes, charges that were augmented in July, 2010, with three counts of genocide.

It was into this caustic maelstrom of fundamentalist ethno-religious, Islamic/Arabic militancy that the five Maryknollers ventured when they arrived in Khartoum and El Obeid in February, 1987, following the Kenya Regional Assembly held in Nairobi the previous month. The full severity of what they were about to experience was not anticipated at that time. At least one of the missionaries, Tom Tiscornia, some years later said, "If people had told me that this was going to happen to us when we went to Sudan, I would have said that I can't do that. I would never be able to do that; that's not me. But it turned out to be easy. I am grateful for what I experienced. It was a significant time in my life as a missionary." Fortunately, though, none of the five were ever physically harmed.

Shortly after the Regional Assembly of January, 1987, Fr. Bill Knipe flew to Khartoum and went immediately to El Obeid, where he had worked from 1981 to 1983.

I went back to working as assistant priest at the cathedral with Bishop Macram Max, who was now the Bishop, and doing communications work for the diocese. I also had a little parish on the edge of the city. These were all refugee people from the Nuba Mountains. I was out there with them for liturgies and we were building grass schools and churches.

After a couple of years, sometime in mid-1989, about the time the government was overthrown, I was asked by Bishop Macram and his council to leave my work in El Obeid town and accept to be director of the language school in El Nahud. He said that the two Comboni priests in charge of the school were asking to leave the school to return to their former types of work. The Bishop said he had consulted with all the diocesan councilors and they all felt that I was the best person to take over the language school. They asked me to think it over for a few minutes while they discussed something else, and then asked me what my answer was.

I said, "Well, Bishop, you know my ability in Arabic. You know that I'm not as good as the two men who are coming off, Alberto Modenesi and Dal Casson. You know that they're experts in Arabic and I'm just a fledgling. I won't be as good as they are in those kinds of things. But I'm willing to do it to the best of my ability."

The Bishop said, "Oh, your Arabic is okay, Bill. You can do the job."

So I went out to El Nahud and took over the language school. I was there for three years, teaching classical Arabic grammar to the students, and it seemed to work out okay. And I enjoyed my time in El Nahud, living way out there in the middle of the desert. I also liked the life in the town.

There were unfortunate events in the lives of the two Comboni priests I replaced. Modenesi later was bitten by a viper and died. Casson later on left the priesthood and got married, although maybe that is not so unfortunate.

Fr. Joe Glynn also went directly to El Obeid and became the financial director of the diocese. He remained there only three years, until ill health forced him to move to Nairobi at the beginning of 1990. (Glynn died in Nairobi on September 13, 1990.) Some months before he moved to Nairobi he was interviewed about his work in El Obeid.

I wasn't doing too much of anything other than taking care of refugees who were under the care of the Sisters of Mother Teresa. The Sisters were having difficulties getting a house. At first they rented but finally they found a place that they would like to live in and set up a permanent community. Although some of the Muslims in the area were not too happy about this, they set up this place. We helped them fix it up, put in the water supply and other things. We built a big house that could hold thirty to forty people, with a kitchen and a lavatory for the Sisters. When I left there were about thirty to thirty-five women and children there. Their husbands were journeying elsewhere.

This was kind of a halfway house. The people were coming up from the south. After walking for days they would stay at this house and be taken care of by the Sisters. If any needed medical care they would be taken to the hospital. They usually arrived without many clothes and the Sisters would make sure they

were properly clothed and back in shape. After they were ready they would go on to Khartoum and another group would come in. So, it was kind of a relief set-up for refugees from the South.

At the main mission in El Obeid there was also a catechumenate operating. This was for Africans, mainly from the South. It would be against the law to try to convert any Muslims. These people would also go to the Sisters, who provided sewing classes for the Sudanese women. Arabic Sudanese women would also come in for these classes. The only ones who had contact with the Arabic women were the Sisters, whereas we could have contact with the African women from the South, even though they also were Sudanese women.

We had a number of Sudanese boys (i.e. African Sudanese from the South) going to school in El Obeid, with hopes of going on to the university. We hoped that we would get some vocations to the priesthood from among them.

One blessing for Sudan is the large number of vocations coming from the Africans. There must be close to 100 kids in the seminary in Juba, which is now the national seminary. Some American Jesuits are staffing it, although the rector is a Sudanese priest who has just finished his studies in Rome.

Glynn would have liked to remain in El Obeid for more years, but his health prevented this. As the 1990s progressed, however, it was becoming more and more difficult for the Maryknollers to remain in Sudan, and Glynn would probably not have been able to continue there for more than two or three more years.

As Glynn and Knipe began their mission work in the town of El Obeid, the other three Maryknollers, Joe Morris, Dick Baker and Tom Tiscornia, went to En Nahud, about 150 miles southwest of El Obeid, to begin a two-year course, in classical Arabic for the first year, and then the colloquial Arabic as spoken in Sudan during the second year. The language school was run by the two Comboni priests mentioned above, Alberto Modenesi and Rolando Del Casson. Many of the students were also Comboni missionaries, but members of other religious orders and missionary societies were also students there. Baker tells of the experience in En Nahud.

We lived at a residence that had been built by Syrian Catholics, which they gave to the Catholic Church when their population became small and they moved out. We studied classical, standard Arabic for about nine months, up till November of 1987. After a while we each moved out and lived separately in different parts of town, each with a family. I had my own place but next to a family with whom I shared meals and other things. It was a good experience for learning Arabic and getting to know the Arabic culture.

These were northern Arabs. They looked very African to us, but were Arabic speaking, as their first language. They wore the dress of Arabs and followed the customs of Muslims. We got to know many people and got some facility in the language, which was good.

I was also able to joke with them, about whether I was or was not going to become a Muslim. I said that I will become a Muslim when I die and go to heaven. If everyone there is a Muslim then I too will become a Muslim. I could

also joke about whether or not I was going to marry a Muslim woman from En Nahud. I would give various farfetched answers that they would soon recognize as my attempt to humorously avoid giving a direct negative answer to the question. They are actually serious about our becoming Muslims because they believe that only Muslims go to heaven and they want us to be with them. But they are very warm and welcoming.

I also got to know a family with eleven kids that had no separation between men and women. Most of the houses there had two courtyards, one for men and one for women, and you would very seldom see the women. But in the area where I was living most of the people were from Darfur, such as this family, and although they are Muslim they are more relaxed in their cultural and religious mores. So I could go into his house – his name was Gabush – and talk with everybody including his daughters and it was a wonderful experience. Gabush was formerly a nurse but had bought a truck, which he was using to struggle to make a living for his eleven kids.

Both Morris and Tiscornia likewise appreciated their experience living with families in En Nahud. Morris lived with a man who was a Christian, who had learned electrical work, including building generators, from a Comboni priest.

He married a Muslim woman, which I thought was strange, but other Christian men in En Nahud had married Muslim women and this was not prevented by the local community. The man I lived with had a very good business, fixing lorries and earning good money. He was from the Kresh tribe, from the South, as was his wife, but had lived in En Nahud for twenty years and was well respected. Despite the respect and good standing he had in the town, he always felt that he could never be fully accepted – not so much because of religion but because of tribe.

He considered himself a practicing Catholic, although he was not married in church and his wife was still Muslim. But his three children were all baptized Catholics.

There were a small number of other Christians who had become permanently settled in En Nahud. The official number was twenty-seven Catholics in the town, although there often would be only five or so at Sunday Mass. But I found out that there were many more Catholics around, but Christian in name only. They didn't participate in any church activities at all. There were also short periods when our church would be full. Many southerners migrated to En Nahud to work on peanut farms outside the town. When they were working on the farms there would hardly be any Christians in the town. As soon as the farm work ended they would come into the town and the church would be full – mainly Dinka people.

In the neighborhood where I lived we were very well accepted by the Muslims. Tom Tiscornia was always with them and when any of us were walking around the town they would call us Tom. We were invited to weddings, sometimes even as a result of a chance meeting on a bus. By the end of the bus ride we were invited to another wedding. We were invited to schools, to homes,

and to all kinds of things. They liked us and treated us terrifically. When I would be coming home from the school the kids in the neighborhood would call out “Nyahuna, Nyahuna,” which means ‘our father,’ the name they give the priest.

They would even be willing to discuss politics and religion with us, at least some of them. They would be very respectful discussing religion. Although they would think that I was wrong by being a Christian, they would never say anything that could possibly affect relationships.

The only one who had an unfortunate incident was Baker, as he relates.

In En Nahud I met once with Muslim radicals. I had been invited by a Suffi Sheikh to take pictures of the mosque he was building with money from Kuwait. I was very respectful and took my shoes off before entering the mosque. I went inside, just as I would do in any other part of the world. But when I came outside the radicals, who were from Khartoum, took issue with my entering the mosque.

I said, “I went in because it is not even open yet. It’s not even ready for prayer. I’m just taking pictures to send to the people who are sponsoring this.”

Then their leader started giving me problems, saying, “You know the enmity between you and us and what happened in Dilling.” I replied, “I don’t know what you are talking about. I was in Dilling overnight, just for a visit. I have no enmity for you. The only reason I am here was that I was invited to be here.” He said, “That Sheikh is ignorant. He has no education.”

So I told him. “My parents didn’t have education either, but they knew a lot more than you do. I don’t think you know properly what it is to go into a mosque. Anybody can go into a mosque, not just a Muslim. If you go to Indonesia, where I’ve been; if you go to Pakistan, where I’ve been. Those are Muslim countries and I was able to go into mosques. So, I think you better study a little more.” And then I walked away.

The Suffi Sheikh was offended by this, as well as many other people who knew I was a friend of the Sheikh. They were offended by people coming from the outside to do things like this. Later the man who confronted me was killed by a flying rock while blasting was being done to dig a well. People thought that this was in retaliation for his lying that I didn’t have permission to take pictures in the mosque. But I visited his wife and brought her food, because I knew that the family might have a bad time. But everything was fine from then on.

The Suffis even invited us to their vigils, which are memorials. This is a prayer ceremony that is different from the normal Muslim prayer ceremony. They move around in a circle, chanting constantly, chanting the name “Allah, Allah, Allah.” We were invited to three or four of these and there was never any problem. Suffis would even come to the language school and give us talks on their sect and the various ceremonies and prayers they do.

Actually, even in Khartoum I never had any problem with Muslim people. It was only that one time in En Nahud, with that radicalized Muslim.

In November, 1987, Morris decided not to continue at the language school for the second session in 1988 on colloquial Arabic. He had already been using colloquial Arabic with the people in the town and found the study of classical Arabic not useful for what he wanted to do. Not only was it difficult but classical Arabic was very different from the modern Arabic spoken on the streets of Sudan.

Languages were never easy for me. Previously it took me three years each to learn both Kisii and Turkana. So, at the end of 1987 I went to Darfur up till September, 1988, when I returned to the language school for study of colloquial Sudanese Arabic, up till April of 1989.

In either mid or late 1989 Morris was supposed to be assigned to the town of Heiban in the Nuba Mountains, but the government had declared a state of emergency in that area. He had visited Heiban during Christmas of 1988 with a forged permission. Already in 1987 at the language school in En Nahud he and the others were discovering how exasperating it was going to be living and working in Sudan. Morris gave a thorough explanation of all the frustrations they were experiencing.

We were never affected directly by the war, except for seeing thousands of displaced people come up to our town. The main and only effect on us was the need to get permission to go anywhere. It took several years for the Bishop to get our work permits. While in language school we had only three-month permissions, which had to be constantly renewed. Whenever we went someplace, we had to get permission from the police and then when we arrived at the other place we had to check in with the police. So far it has not been a problem, but it has been a nuisance.

While I was in language school for the second time Bishop Macram Max was supposed to be working on getting permission for me to go to Heiban. When I talk with him in his office he seems very interested in this. But after I leave his office, I don't know what if anything is being done about it.

(Several of the Maryknollers hinted in interviews that Bishop Macram was notoriously slow in following up on their requests for diocesan help in getting permissions to travel or do other things in Sudan. Whether the delays were due to his behavioral tendency to procrastinate in attending to administrative details or to the aggressive anti-Catholicism, especially with regard to foreign missionaries, of the militant Islamic government has not been ascertained.)

Then in June, 1989, the government was overthrown by Al Bashir's National Islamic Front (NIF), which rejected any peace overtures with the south, stepped up the civil war, and ordered all expatriate missionaries out of South Kordofan Province. Morris decided to give a year to see if permission would come to work in the Nuba Mountains and in the meantime accepted an assignment to help out in the parish in El Obeid, as one of the priests was going on home leave. When he was interviewed in the latter half of 1989 (in Nairobi), Morris sounded hopeful about getting this permission. He seemed to believe that it was just an administrative matter of getting permission and that the civil

war was not a serious obstacle. His hopeful sentiments indicated that he may even have believed that the civil war would be resolved in the not too distant future, since the Al-Mahdi government had been trying to implement some kind of peace settlement. Of the new government Morris said, "They are trying to make it an Islamic state, but my impression is that it's a very small group, albeit a very influential, wealthy group of people, who want this Islamic state." Because of the very good relations that he and the others had had with the Sudanese Muslim people, it might not have been evident yet how militant the new government would be.

In late 1989, however, Morris decided to leave Sudan and withdraw from Maryknoll. After return to the United States he got married.

In the meantime, Baker and Tiscornia finished up their course at En Nahud in late 1988 (late October or early November), and moved to Babanusa – finally. This is the place, about 100 miles south of En Nahud, that they had been promised back in 1986, when the discussions with Bishop Macram Max had begun. They did not anticipate how restricted they would be, as Baker explains:

Babanusa is a town with a rail link, located in South Kordofan not too far from the border with South Sudan. There were many southerners in the town working on the railway. They were stranded there because of the war and in fact were living in the railway boxcars.

The church compound was very simple, with a very small church made of mud. There had been a secondary school there at one time, built by the Combonis, but the government had taken it away. There were three other buildings on the compound. I lived in one and Tom in another. We used the third building as a common place for eating and other purposes.

We were taken to Babanusa by the vicar general, Fr. Guido Donatelli, a very fine Comboni priest, and Fr. Brashir, the rector of the seminary. We went right to the see the officials and were immediately told that we were there only as guests. We could not pray with the people. We could not organize any kind of prayer. And when we left the town we would not be allowed back with the same permission we had come with this first time. Furthermore, although we could walk around the town we were not allowed to go outside of the town, and particularly not to go to the camp for displaced people, who were mostly southerners. There was an Irish NGO working in the camp and we were allowed to visit this NGO. But if the Irish wanted to visit us they had to get specific permission from security to do so. Fr. Donatelli took this report back to the Bishop.

So we just started walking around trying to meet Christians, waiting to see if the Bishop would get permission for us to do pastoral work. We also met one of the catechists, who had been leading prayer services before we arrived. We were surprised to discover that Christians had Muslim names. We asked one, who said he wanted work and had to have a Muslim name to get work. He said his children – they were all Dinka – had to be given Muslim names as well if they wanted to go to school. They could not use their Dinka names.

Tiscornia adds that this walking around was of value, enabling them to get to know people during their first two to three months in Babanusa.

While we were walking around the town we were meeting many Muslims as well, which was unavoidable. Through visiting the Christians at their homes we got to know them well. They were not used to priests coming around to their homes. This was apparently not a mission method used by the other missionaries in Sudan. Coming from Tanzania, we were accustomed to visiting people, going into their homes and eating with them. But the Sudanese Catholics got used to us.

Both Baker and Tiscornia talked about their first, and what would turn out to be their only, Christmas in Babanusa, a memorable experience. Tiscornia related it in the following way:

Christmas was approaching and we had never heard from the Bishop. He did not get involved in this whole thing. Every day Dick and I had a liturgy just by ourselves. This was a simple, little liturgy, but very important; it was a time for us to pray and reflect on what we were doing.

On Christmas Eve Dick and I were sitting in our little mud house sipping some soup and listening to the Christmas carols being played on the BBC radio. The whole world was celebrating Christmas but we were forbidden to celebrate Christmas. In fact, the Christian people had been forbidden to slaughter any animals for Christmas; they could not have any feast on Christmas. As we were taking our soup, suddenly Maria Stevens, a heavy-set Christian woman from Juba in the south who used to visit us all the time, came into our house singing a Christmas carol to us. She was a little bit tipsy, but it was a neat thing.

Prior to Christmas we had asked a Lieutenant in the Army, Joe Benali, who was a Catholic from the south, if he could get permission for us to celebrate Christmas Mass with the people. Right after that he was sent away. We don't know if it was because we had asked him to get permission for us, but it was now Christmas and he wasn't around to give us a reply.

In any event, we had informed the Catholics that we would be having Mass in the church on Christmas Day and if anyone wanted to come pray with us they could come. On Christmas morning Dick and I were standing in the compound and suddenly a car pulled in. Joe Benali got out and we asked him if he had gotten us permission. He said, "No. But we are Christians and we pray. So, let us go pray." That was outstanding that this officer in the army would have enough guts to say that it is important for us to pray.

So, we prayed in this tiny room that we had, about twelve to fifteen of us. We celebrated Mass in Arabic. I was the celebrant and Dick preached. He preached on Emmanuel, the meaning of Emmanuel: God is with us, *Hali Fee*. It was a really beautiful Christmas.

Just as we were finishing the liturgy we heard the sound of a motorcycle pulling into our compound. It was an official, from Immigration or some official department. When we came out – we were unvested when we went outside – he merely wished us a 'Happy Eid,' that is, a happy feast day. He said that he is from

the Nuba Mountains and doesn't agree with the government policy that Christians can't pray. But as a member of the government he has to follow policy, but that on this day he didn't see anything. In fact, he knew what we were doing, because in the Nuba Hills you have Catholics, Protestants and Muslims in one family. But he wished us well and left.

That afternoon we said a second Christmas Mass. Two Irish girls living in Babanusa asked us to come to their house to say Mass, which we did. We just sat on the floor in their living room, in a small circle, because there was nothing else to use. A male friend of theirs, also Irish, sat outside on the porch, in case anyone else came. So, that is how we celebrated Christmas that year. I thought it was a very striking Christmas.

The following month, on January 6, 1989, the feast of Epiphany, Bishop Macram Max finally came to get permission for Tiscornia and Baker to publicly lead liturgical services for the Catholic people. The two priests didn't have a car so they requested some Red Cross people to provide them with transport. The plane was late and they weren't sure if the Bishop was even coming. Later in the morning they heard the sound of a plane circling above the town and went out to meet the Bishop. Town officials also went to the airport, as they had heard that some very important government officials were coming to Babanusa on the plane, although they had received no official notice of this. When the plane landed, Bishop Macram Max disembarked along with two government officials, Martin Malwal, a high-ranking army officer, and another man who was a minister in the government. Both were Catholics. Tiscornia narrates what happened next.

The town officials asked them where they would like to go. They said they wanted to go to the church. Yet the town officials had said that there is no church in Babanusa. So they came to our small compound and the Bishop celebrated the Mass of Epiphany right then and there. We had pre-informed some of the Christians, who came in to attend the Mass. After the Mass, the Bishop met with the town officials and obtained for us permission to say public Masses.

Baker adds that while the Bishop was talking with the officials, Malwal met with a large group of the town elders.

He said to them, "I want my children back." He was referring to the slavery going on, the practice of capturing Dinka boys and making them slaves in the north. So, Malwal wanted his boys to be set free and returned to the south.

From that point Baker and Tiscornia were free to do all the pastoral work they wanted. The Bishop had made sure that they would also be allowed to return to Babanusa from El Obeid, if they went to the diocesan headquarters for a meeting or other purpose. The two priests were able to not only work in the town but could also go out to the railway boxcars where so many of the southerners were living. However, this would turn out to be short-lived permission.

In mid-1989, right about the time that the military junta was overthrowing the al-Mahdi government, Bishop Macram Max called all the priests to El Obeid for a diocesan

meeting. After the meeting, Baker and Tiscornia went to the provincial governor and to other offices to get permission to return to Babanusa, but were denied permission. In fact, they never returned to Babanusa again. (Tiscornia finally visited Babanusa again in 2009, on a personal visit.)

A short while later, the Al Bashir government ordered all expatriate priests removed from South Kordofan Province. Italian Comboni priests were running several active parishes (and relatively large parishes, by north Sudan standards) and they all had to leave. The government would allow only Sudanese priests to work in any of those parishes, but there were very few Sudanese priests.

For the second half of 1989, Tiscornia went to El Fashir in Darfur and also to the United States for furlough. On his return he was asked by the Bishop if he would accept an assignment to be rector of the high school seminary in El Obeid. This was not an assignment that Tiscornia desired, as he explains.

I never wanted to work in a seminary, in fact I didn't even believe in them. When we first went to El Obeid Bishop Macram had asked Fr. Ed Hayes, the Tanzania Regional Superior, if I could teach in the seminary then. This was because Bishop Macram and I knew each other, dating back to 1973 when by chance we both appeared on a Maryknoll television program in New York City, being produced by Fr. Ron Saucchi. Macram was only a priest then.

In 1990, however, Bishop Macram wanted the rector, Fr. Brashir, to go to Babanusa, since only a Sudanese priest could go there, and he desperately needed someone to take over as rector. Because of this situation I said that certainly I would accept. As missionaries we are there to serve the local church. Thus, I was very comfortable in becoming rector. My taking his place in the seminary allowed him to go where I couldn't go.

I enjoyed it. There was a Dutch priest there, serving as a counselor and spiritual director, and he taught me how to be a rector. The boys were nice and many of them eventually went on to become priests.

The seminary was merely a residence, for about forty boys. The boys went to a secondary school run by the Combonis, called St. Kizito Secondary School, which was on the same compound. This was for the academic component, whereas the residence is where the formation for priesthood took place.

Tiscornia stayed as rector for two years, up till May, 1992. The original contract with the diocese was for only five years and by mid-1992 only he and Knipe remained in Sudan. Both Morris and Glynn had been gone for several years and Baker had first worked in Khartoum for a year and then gone to Nairobi in 1991 to begin planning to work with Sudanese refugees in western Ethiopia. Thus, Tiscornia informed the Bishop that he was terminating his time in El Obeid.

He summed up his time in El Obeid as follows:

I had become very comfortable in speaking Arabic, although my spoken Arabic is better than my written Arabic. I am more interested in communicating with people, which I can do with no problem.

The Sudanese were wonderful people, really, really good people. Maybe because I am a foreigner, an oddity to them, but they always treated me very good. And I got to know the people. The politics is bad, but the people are wonderful.

I was in the seminary during the first Gulf War, when there would be major demonstrations, right outside the seminary even, with people screaming, “Down, down USA; down, down USA.” But I never had a problem. I would just stay inside the seminary until the demonstration was over.

I had gone to Kenya for the Assembly in January, 1991, while the Gulf War was being fought, and on return got caught in a demonstration in Khartoum. I was in a taxi, going right through the demonstration, with lorries full of people and hundreds of people walking and screaming, “Down, down USA.” The taxi driver asked me in Arabic if I was from Germany. I said no. He asked if I was from Holland, and again I said no. Then I said I was from America. But nothing happened.

Tiscornia returned to the United States and did formation work at the Maryknoll seminary in Chicago for three years. However, this was not the end of his mission work in Sudan. As we will see in Part Seven, he later worked in the Nuba Mountains and now has been in Wau, Sudan, at the Catholic University, since September, 2010.

In mid-1989 Baker was in a quandary as to what to do. He could not go back to Babanusa and there did not seem to be any work to do in the town of El Obeid. “After the missionaries were expelled there were too many people in El Obeid for the work, since the communities where we could work were few in number.” After a search, he finally decided on going to Khartoum, to a parish called Hajj Yusuf, where a Missionary of Africa priest (formerly called White Fathers) was the pastor.

Almost all the Catholics in this parish were southerners, who have a unique type of Arabic called Juba Arabic, which is a simplified version of standard Arabic and even of the colloquial Arabic spoken in Sudan. So I was able to preach and to work with the people.

I had one little project in which we put parables to music. I found people who could compose music – although they could not write music on paper – but they could compose melodies, in which the refrain was the punch line of the parable. We would put the songs on tape and teach the people to sing these parable songs. Then I would preach about them in Arabic. In addition to helping the people to learn the parables, this was a good language learning exercise for me.

I never had any problem with the militant Arabs in Khartoum, since it was known that we were there solely for the southern Sudanese. So I was never prevented from traveling to visit the southerners nor were we ever bothered by the militants regarding where we lived. The only area in which the militants affected us was to raze the schools that had been built for the southerners on plots that the church had obtained. The militants claimed that the land belonged to someone else and then they would come in and bulldoze the schools. This made it difficult

for the southerners to take root in Khartoum. Furthermore, the government was building camps for the southerners way out in the desert far from Khartoum.

But as I said, I personally did not have any problem.

In the middle of 1990 Baker went with Fr. Carroll Houle, at that time the Area Coordinator for Africa, for a short visit to Gambela, in western Ethiopia on the border with Sudan, where a huge number of Sudanese refugees from Nilotic ethnic groups had fled, to escape the war and Sudanese government oppression. The Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) was interested in doing education projects for the refugees and was looking for someone fluent in Arabic to work with the Sudanese. However, as that was the time when the civil war in Ethiopia that led to the overthrow of Mengistu had escalated, security was strict all over Ethiopia and particularly in Gambela. As it was impossible to get permission to live in Gambela, Baker returned to Hajj Yusuf Parish till the end of 1990.

Baker discussed whether he felt that he made any contribution to the people of Hajj Yusuf.

I was able to preach, to be with the people, to understand who they were, and to witness how committed they were to their faith. One day we were celebrating some kind of feast in a courtyard where there was a church, when some stones came over the wall. People outside were throwing stones over the wall at us. I couldn't believe how quickly the southerners reacted; they jumped right over the wall and went straight after those people.

If there was a feast, a major feast, they would march right down the main road with their cross, to show that they were Christians. Nobody was going to keep them from believing what they wanted to believe. It was very interesting to see how, in a very hostile environment, they maintained their faith, a very strong faith.

In Hajj Yusuf there were people living on the periphery, without any land of their own. They were always being referred to as slaves. There is an insulting Arabic word for slave, and they were being called that very often. It would have been easy for them to become Muslim and get all the benefits of this, but they wouldn't. It was quite a lesson about faith lived the hard way.

That was a lesson that we learned. Our contribution? I don't know, given the little service I did in Hajj Yusuf; maybe just the relationships, maybe evangelization, or maybe just the witness more than anything else.

I also got to know Cardinal [Gabriel] Zubeir Wako, the Archbishop of Khartoum. [Cardinal Zubeir Wako has been the Archbishop of Khartoum since 1981 to the present. He was the first Sudanese Archbishop of Khartoum.] He is a southerner and a very, very strong person. The government has tried to give him all kinds of difficulties, for instance when he wants to leave the country the government will try to prevent him from being able to return to Khartoum, and has pressured him in other ways. But he is a very strong person.

In early 1991 Baker left Khartoum, after four years working in Sudan. He went to Nairobi, expecting to get a visa to work in Gambela, Ethiopia. As no visa was forthcoming he went to Mombasa, Kenya, for three months to work with Somali

refugees, as will be noted in Part Seven. In mid-1991, he was able to go to Gambela on a three-month visa, but was unable to obtain any longer permit. He then went back to the United States up till 1995, during which time he got a Masters Degree in Library Science and helped refurbish the library at Maryknoll, NY.

In an interview some years later, Baker made the following comments about the militant Islamic government in Khartoum under Al Bashir.

I think it's sad. It is obvious now with what has happened in Darfur, showing that the problem is not religious. Religion is merely a means to unify and control populations. I think it is about the mineral wealth of the country and who is going to benefit from that. Right now the political and economic power is in the hands of an Arabic minority who make up only forty percent of the population. They are called the Riverine Arabs. They live along the Nile River, starting from the north of Sudan down to where the two Nile Rivers join (White Nile and Blue Nile) in Khartoum, and further down the Nile to Kusti [on the White Nile, about 180 miles south of Khartoum] where there is good farmland, and even to Kassala. [Kassala is 250 miles due east of Khartoum, only about 25 miles west of the border with Eritrea.] And even there they are not Arab; they are Bajorit.

The people of Darfur are not Arabs, they are Africans. Likewise, the people of the south are Africans. But ever since Independence [1956], every political party that has had power in the north has had the dream of an Arabic/Islamic State. By marginalizing all other ethnic groups they try to keep control of the center, where lies the economic power and political life of the country. That is where the problem lies.

Religion is just a tool in order to get there and keep what they have. The people of Darfur are all Muslims, yet Al Bashir has been indicted for humanitarian crimes against them, his own people. They get a lot of support from Arab nations around them, who don't want to see Sudan anything but an Arabic and Islamic state.

More will be written in Part Seven about Baker's work in Gambela, Ethiopia, from 1995 to 2002, and then his assignment to northwestern Ethiopia in December, 2008.

After both Baker and Tiscornia had left Sudan, the only Maryknoller remaining was Bill Knipe. In June 1992 he finished up his assignment at the language school and was replaced by a Mill Hill Father. He had probably intended to resume his communications work in El Obeid but went to Khartoum, intending to take a short leave out of the country. Instead he was, as he referred to it, "trapped in Khartoum for eight months."

The government was holding my passport and wouldn't give it back to me. They were trying to force me to make a deal with them that I would leave Sudan and not come back.

I stayed with the Mill Hill Fathers in Khartoum for eight months, from June, 1992, until February, 1993. I went to work at the Catholic Secretariat every day, to make myself useful. I did press releases and wrote articles for the Tablet

(the national Catholic magazine from England) and other periodicals, telling what was going on with the Church in Sudan.

Finally after the eight months, due to the intervention of some Arab friends in Khartoum, the government agreed to give me an exit permit and a reentry permit, which is what I was trying to get. I left the Sudan and went to Nairobi and the United States for a little vacation. But I wanted to come back right away since Pope John Paul was coming to Sudan that year, in March, 1993.

So I was there when the Pope arrived. I was with him in the cathedral and in several other locales during his two-day visit. It was quite an experience. The whole country erupted with joy. Most of them were Arabs and Muslims. But to them somehow the Pope was an ok guy. That was very interesting.

Knipe's strong articles in the Tablet were very influential and opened the eyes of many people, especially Catholics, all over the world about the repression of non-Muslims in Sudan. Fortunately, he was never detained nor physically harmed. A number of Sudanese priests and even a few Bishops were imprisoned and beaten and of course the Al Bashir government was brutal towards the people of the south and the Nuba Mountains all through the 1990s.

Even though Knipe had stubbornly held out for a reentry permit to stay working in Sudan in 1993, while he was in Nairobi Fr. Carroll Houle, the new Kenya Regional Superior, asked him to transfer to Nairobi and work for AMECEA. Knipe accepted this assignment. He remained in Nairobi up till 1998 and an account of his work in Nairobi will be covered in Part Four.