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AFRICA/UGANDA-Centenary of the evangelization of northern Uganda: "we are living in the reconstruction phase," says the Bishop of Lira to Fides

Lira (Agenzia Fides) - "Today we conclude the second Archdiocesan Synod of Gulu. If Synod means 'walking together' I remember that 100 years ago, in 1911, when the first Comboni missionaries arrived in Gulu, alone, on the path which St. Comboni began, thanks to this process started one hundred years ago there exists a church that walks together and is able to call a synod. It seems a pretty significant event, " says Bishop Giuseppe Franzelli, Bishop of Lira in northern Uganda to Fides.
"Tomorrow we celebrate the centenary of the evangelization of this area. In fact, the Comboni missionaries arrived in these territories in February 1911, but because in February of this year, elections were held, a decision was taken to postpone the celebrations for the centenary in May, " explains Mgr. Franzelli. "The anniversary concerns in particular the metropolitan archdiocese of Gulu, since the diocese of Lira was evangelized a bit 'later, again by the Comboni missionaries who began their journey from there. For this reason we celebrate the centenary together, Gulu and Lira, because it is like a tree, once planted it spreads its branches, " said Bishop Franzelli.
Taking stock of the missionary in his diocese, the Bishop of Lira says: " The diocese of Lira was founded in 1968, cutting out one part of the territory from Gulu. The Comboni Missionaries present are 19, 17 priests and 2 brothers, and the Comboni Sisters are 12. But in these 43 years we have seen a sharp increase of the local clergy. "
"Today - Bishop Franzelli continues - there are 45 diocesan priests and two Apostles of Jesus, a missionary congregation founded by some of the Comboni Fathers. There are also two local religious congregations, one based in Gulu, and the other in Lira founded by its first Bishop, Mgr.Caesar Asili, the Missionary Sisters of Mary Mother of the Church. This congregation has 270 nuns who work not only in Lira but also in other dioceses in Uganda, as well as in Kenya, Tanzania and South Sudan. "
Out of a population of about 2 million inhabitants, one million and 86,000 are Catholics, distributed in 18 parishes. "They are not enough – Mgr. Franzelli admits - but with the current clergy I cannot afford to open others. The parishes are in turn divided into chapels. The one with the fewest has 31, the one that has the most has 102. The thousand chapels of the diocese are governed thanks to about 1,200 lay catechists. "
Lira has also been the scene of violence on behalf of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA). "Among the most serious episodes I remember the assault at the girls' school in Aboke in October 1996, 139 girls were abducted by the rebels. Thanks to the courage of Sister Rachele Fassera, who chased the kidnappers in the forest, 109 were freed. Then others managed to escape in the following years, although some were killed. I welcomed the last one, she had had a child from Joseph Kony, the LRA leader, " said Bishop Franzelli.
"Even here, as in Gulu, people have been forced to evacuate," recalls the Bishop. "In and around the town of Lira, there were 16 camps for internally displaced persons, to the point that the city's population had grown to 200,000. Now that the LRA is no longer here, people are returning home, although there is still much to rebuild. This is the phase we are living, that of reconstruction, " concluded Bishop Franzelli. (L.M.) (Agenzia Fides 20/05/2011)

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