

DO NOT BE AFRAID: RISE ABOVE ADVERSITY!

Message of Encouragement and Hope from the Catholic Bishops of South Sudan

16th June 2016

"Be strong and of good courage, and act. Do not be afraid or dismayed; for the Lord God, my God, is with you. He will not fail you or forsake you, until all the work for the service of the house of the Lord is finished." (1 Chronicles 28:20)

PREAMBLE

We the Catholic bishops of South Sudan, meeting in Juba from 14th-16th June 2016, have prayed and reflected about the situation in our country in the light of the Gospel, and we issue this Message of Encouragement and Hope to the people of South Sudan and our regional and international friends and partners.

In the life of the Catholic Church, there have been many blessings during this year. The Holy Father Pope Francis declared it a Year of Mercy with the words: "This Jubilee Year of Mercy excludes no one." We are called upon to show mercy and forgiveness, even in the face of great evil and suffering, but we are also called upon to repent and do penance.

The Synods on the Family in 2014 and 2015 led to the publication in April 2016 of the Post Synodal Pastoral Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*, The Joy of Love. It affirms the centrality of the family – indeed "The Church is a family of families", God's family - and dwells on pastoral care for the family. The family does not exist in a vacuum. Real problems which face families in South Sudan are recognised in the Exhortation; "the family has the right to decent housing... Families, in particular, suffer from problems related to work, where young people have few possibilities... Societies experiencing violence due to war, terrorism or the presence of organized crime are witnessing the deterioration of the family... the so-called phenomenon of 'street-children' is on the rise... forced migration of families, resulting from situations of war, persecution, poverty and injustice, and marked by the vicissitudes of a journey that often puts lives at risk, traumatizes people and destabilizes families..." But the document also speaks highly of African families: "In some countries, especially in various parts of Africa, secularism has not weakened certain traditional values, and marriages forge a strong bond between two wider families, with clearly defined structures for dealing with problems and conflicts."¹ May the strength of our South Sudanese families be a resource for peace and reconciliation in our nation.

From 11th-13th April 2016, an important conference entitled "Nonviolence and Just Peace: Contributing to the Catholic Understanding of and Commitment to Nonviolence" was held in Rome under the auspices of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace and Pax Christi International. The South Sudanese church participated. The Conference declared: "We believe that there is no 'just war'... Pope Saint John XXIII wrote that war is not a suitable way to restore rights; Pope Paul VI linked peace and development, and told the UN 'no more war'; Pope Saint John Paul II said that 'war belongs to the tragic past, to history'; Pope Benedict XVI said that 'loving the enemy is the nucleus of the Christian revolution'; and Pope Francis said 'the true strength of the Christian is the power of truth and love, which leads to the renunciation of all violence. Faith and violence are incompatible'. He has also urged the 'abolition of war'..." and called for "A Just Peace approach... to build peace as well as to prevent, defuse, and to heal the damage of violent conflict. This ethic includes a commitment to human dignity and thriving relationships... We recognize that peace requires justice and justice requires peacemaking."² Echoes of our own frequent statements that the civil war in South Sudan has no moral justification can be heard in this.

1 All quotes in this paragraph are from *Amoris Laetitia*.

2 All quotes in this paragraph are from "An appeal to the Catholic Church to recommit to the centrality of Gospel nonviolence", Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace and Pax Christi International.

THE TRANSITIONAL GOVERNMENT OF NATIONAL UNITY (TGoNU)

In August 2015, we welcomed the signing of the Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan. We appreciate the serenity with which it has been accepted by the citizens, despite their worries, and the apparent willingness amongst the parties to talk about their disagreements. We recognise that it is a compromise agreement and both sides may have reservations, but we said at the time that it must be signed and implemented because it is the agreed tool to bring about a comprehensive ceasefire. Reservations are not grounds for rejecting the agreement. Only when we have stopped killing ourselves can we sit down together to rebuild the nation. Therefore we are encouraged by the formation of the Transitional Government of National Unity. We now have a window of opportunity, a breathing space, for South Sudanese to find our own home-grown solution to the root causes of our conflicts. Our nation is still fragile, but this is the time for reform and reconstruction.

Our leaders have overcome many political obstacles to form the TGoNU, and we congratulate them on reaching this point. We recognise the difficulties they face and we want to encourage, affirm and support them in resolving the difficult task ahead. Whatever may have happened in the past, now is not the time for recriminations. Now is the time for the government and all citizens to work together for the future. Do not indulge in destructive criticism; instead roll up your sleeves and get to work to build a new nation for ourselves, our children and our children's children.

RISE ABOVE NEGATIVITY

"Finally, brothers [and sisters], whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things." (Philippians 4:8)

We regret the amount of negativity and pessimism that we hear – from South Sudanese who are still steeped in the old ways of power and tribalism; from the international community; on the internet; in the media; on social media; within the diaspora. We say very clearly: NO MORE NEGATIVITY!

"Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such a word as is good for edification according to the need of the moment, so that it will give grace to those who hear." (Ephesians 4:29)

We ourselves do not want to fall into the trap of pointing fingers, but we wish to name some of the negative practices that we observe. Stop assuming that South Sudan and South Sudanese are doomed always to fail, and instead give support and encouragement. Stop disseminating hate speech and tribalism on the internet and social media, and instead spread constructive peaceful messages. Stop propagating rumours, gossip, misinformation and disinformation. Stop attacking and accusing each other, stop pursuing narrow personal and tribal interests, but instead work together for the good of the nation. Be ready to compromise for peace and for the common good. Stop seeing everything in its most negative light. Stop preparing for war; move with the times into the new culture of peace and reconciliation.

We are also conscious of the human frailty of our leaders. Like every other South Sudanese, they suffer the trauma of a lifetime of conflict. Do not undermine them. Instead offer them support and encouragement to rise above their personal interests. Reassure them that the nation and the international community understand their situation. They are human beings, sons and daughters of God, brothers and sisters to all of us. They need healing. Let us treat them with love and mercy, not hatred and condemnation. The priority now is reforming and rebuilding our shattered nation.

"A perverse man spreads strife, and a slanderer separates intimate friends" (Proverbs 16:28)

Constant negativity can be a self-fulfilling prophecy. If you keep on saying that something will fail, then ultimately you will cause it to fail. Instead be positive, and work concretely for success.

IMMEDIATE PRIORITIES FOR TGoNU

We encourage the TGoNU to concentrate on some immediate priorities to alleviate the suffering of our people, including a comprehensive ceasefire, bringing safety to all the people of South Sudan whether in the towns or countryside, improving the economy, delivering basic services and resolving the humanitarian situation, so that our people can live dignified and humane lives. Currently people still live in fear, many workers are not being paid, and many families have no food. It is particularly dangerous when the army and other security organs are not being paid, as this can lead to further insecurity.

We thank the international community for the support they have provided, often under difficult circumstances, and humbly ask them to continue to provide services and relief to the poorest of the poor. At the same time we urge the government to remove obstacles to this endeavour.

THE ROLE OF THE CHURCH

We re-commit ourselves and our Church to play our part, in our own work and through our South Sudan Council of Churches' three-pillared Action Plan for Peace: Advocacy, Neutral Forums and Reconciliation. We repeat our commitment to the process laid out by our Church leaders in Kigali in June 2015. For several months SSCC has been laying the foundations for this process, in which the Catholic Church is fully involved. Now that the TGoNU is formed the process will be rolled out, seeking home-grown solutions to our conflicts.

We draw attention to some of the uniquely Catholic initiatives, including Holy Trinity Peace Village in Kuron, the new Good Shepherd Peace Centre in Kit, peace studies being taught in our Catholic University of South Sudan, pastoral work in the Protection of Civilians (POC) camps, trauma healing workshops that have taken place across the country, and many local peace and reconciliation efforts by our bishops, priests, sisters, brothers and laity. We recognise that lasting peace requires personal transformation, conversion, repentance, change of heart, brought about through prayer by God's grace.

The Church alone cannot bring peace and reconciliation to South Sudan, but we pledge to be leaders in this role, encouraging all other people of good will. There is no other national institution that can take on this leadership role; we humbly accept this burden of responsibility.

END VIOLENCE

We cannot end without remembering our dear Sister Veronika Theresia Racková who died of her wounds after being shot by SPLA soldiers in Yei less than a month ago. In the eyes of the people whom she served she is already a martyr. May she rest in peace. Attacking medical personnel is a war crime and a crime against humanity, but Sr Veronika is only one of thousands of women, men and children who have been killed in this senseless conflict. Let her death draw attention to and be symbolic of all those other deaths, and let us state unequivocally that there should be no more such atrocities. We are encouraged that her attackers have been arrested. We hope that they will face justice for their acts, and that other armed youth will learn a lesson. But we do not want to focus solely on these three young men, brandishing lethal weapons on the instructions of others. *"Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing"* (Luke 23:34). We pray for them and we offer them our forgiveness and mercy in this Jubilee Year of Mercy.

However we must protest at the ethic of violence in our country. We reiterate the message of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace and Pax Christi International April 2016 conference on Nonviolence and Just Peace, that violence is never the solution and simply leads to more violence. We wish to challenge the militaristic culture in South Sudan, where even civilians carry assault rifles. We condemn the arms trade which provides these weapons and we stress the need for peaceful disarmament of civilians. We abhor the fact that thousands of young men are carrying arms when we don't have enough money to provide basic services to our own people; this is a misuse of our national resources. We are appalled to hear reports that there are still many child soldiers. We beg that the lives of our children be spared; let them prepare for their future through education rather than being trapped in violence.

Truly the current Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) is not the same army which protected and liberated us between 1983 and 2005. We are deeply concerned that many of these armed men appear to be poorly disciplined, poorly trained, poorly led, poorly educated militia, preying on the population, rather than

a disciplined force protecting the people. Many of their officers are militia leaders, not professionally-trained soldiers. We urge the formation of a single professional national army that we can be proud of, to defend our borders against external enemies but not to kill their own brothers and sisters. We are saddened that many crimes are reportedly committed by armed men connected with the SPLA and other national security organs, and we note that they are rarely brought to justice. Where is the rule of law? As a nation we should be ashamed.

We must also add our concern that churches and church personnel are the subject of frequent attacks, threats and robberies. When did armed forces in South Sudan stop respecting the House of God? Even the Sudanese army during the 22-year civil war did not behave as badly as some of the armed groups currently operating in many parts of South Sudan.

THE WAY FORWARD





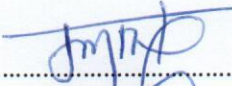
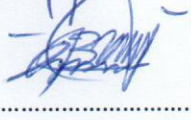

This Jubilee Year of Mercy is an opportune moment to begin the long journey of peace and reconciliation. We invite the people of South Sudan and all people of good will throughout the world to continue praying and working for peace and reconciliation in South Sudan. We invite all parties to hold true to the principle of dialogue in resolving their differences. We invite our leaders, citizens and friends to commit to the reforming and reconstruction of our nation, building peace together, and we repeat our commitment to this task.

We also invite our leaders President Salva Kiir Mayardit and First Vice President Riek Machar to honour the agreement they signed, and to publicly reassure the citizens of their willingness to work together for the good of the nation by making both practical and symbolic gestures such as praying together, touring the country and meeting the ordinary people together, paying special attention to those who have been displaced from their homes. We take this opportunity to invite the two leaders to make a short spiritual retreat together; we would be happy to facilitate such an important occasion.

Finally, we believe our hope is well-founded because the future of our country does not depend on political and military leaders alone; with God's help it is the people of South Sudan who will ultimately bring peace, reconciliation and justice to our nation. We put our trust in God and the people.

We have recently celebrated the great Christian Feast of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit came down upon the disciples of Jesus and gave them wisdom and courage. May the Holy Spirit descend upon our nation, its citizens and leaders, its friends, partners and supporters, and bring wisdom, courage and peace to South Sudan. May God bless you all.

Given this 16th day of June 2016 in Juba, South Sudan.

Name	Signature
1. H.G. Paolino Lukudu Loro Metropolitan Archbishop of Juba	+ 
2. H.L. Erkolano Lodu Tombe Bishop of Yei Diocese	+ 
3. H.L. Eduardo Hiiboro Kussala Bishop of Tombura-Yambio Diocese	+ 
4. Monsignor Roko Taban Musa Apostolic Administrator of Malakal Diocese	+ 
5. Rev. Fr. John Mathiang Diocesan Administrator of Rumbek Diocese	+ 
6. Fr. Germano Bernardo Baku Vicar General of Wau Diocese	+ 
7. H.L. Vincent Majwok Emeritus Bishop of Malakal Diocese	+ 
8. H.L. Paride Taban Emeritus Bishop of Torit Diocese	+ 