

## MESSAGE FROM THE SOUTH SUDAN CATHOLIC BISHOPS

### “GO DEEPER”

JUBA, 30th JANUARY 2015

When Jesus finished speaking, he said to Simon, “Push the boat out further to the deep water, and you and your partners let down your nets for a catch.” “Master,” Simon answered, “we worked hard all night long and caught nothing. But if you say so, I will let down the nets.”

They let them down and caught such a large number of fish that the nets were about to break. (Luke 5:4-6)

#### Preamble

We, the Catholic bishops of South Sudan, meeting in Juba from 28th – 30th January 2015, with the Apostolic Nuncio to Kenya and South Sudan, His Grace Archbishop Charles Daniel Balvo, and with our collaborators, having reflected on the disastrous war in our country and concerned about the escalation of the conflict and the uncertain prospects for peace, re-iterate the solemn declaration made in our “Message of Hope” of 25th September 2014:

"the current war in South Sudan is evil... There is no moral justification for any further killing. We can accept no excuses nor conditions from any party or individual for the continuation of the war. The fighting and killing must stop immediately and unconditionally... We declare before God that it is evil for any party to use continuing violence to try to further their political agenda."

We ask you, our leaders, to leave the safety and comfort of the shallow water and push the boat out into the deep water. Doing all the “normal” things – negotiations, talks, conferences, consultations, diplomacy, statements, hand-shakes in front of the TV cameras, threats of sanctions and arms embargoes – has “caught nothing” even though “we worked hard”. Have the courage to go deeper, leave aside common assumptions, think outside the political box, make unthinkable concessions, and take risks to bring peace. Let us all, including we bishops, take up that challenge and put ourselves into the hands of God to catch “a large number of fish”. Let peace come in abundance.

#### The War Must Stop: We Will Finish Ourselves and Finish the Nation

South Sudan has always been considered a God-fearing nation, whether Christians, Muslims or followers of traditional religion. But in this senseless and inhuman war the nation has abandoned the ways of God.

This war is evil. As a people we must not be afraid to name sin for what it is, and we hereby name this war as a sin. It is sinful for either party now to mount a dry season offensive.

Once again we say that this war must stop immediately. Some people sit in Addis Ababa discussing politics while on the ground other people are fighting and dying. The political negotiations cannot be allowed to continue with “business as usual” while the killing continues. Only when the killing stops will it be acceptable to negotiate for posts and positions.

Concessions must be made; no political advantage is worth killing more innocent civilians, nor even killing soldiers. The Church is like a Mother who mourns the death of any of God's children.

This war is about power, not about the good of the people. The aspirations of individuals and factions have led to a cycle of revenge killing. The whole nation, including the leaders and the fighters, is exhausted with war and is being worn down by attrition. We say to all who are involved in any way: if you continue fighting you will finish yourselves and you will finish the nation. The nation needs to be salvaged from this sin.

We the Catholic bishops of South Sudan have continued to make prophetic statements which have been disregarded by leaders on all sides. We pray that our voice will be heeded, and we commit ourselves to the follow-up of this message.

## Leadership

Jesus called them all together to him and said, "You know that those who are considered rulers of the heathen have power over them, and the leaders have complete authority. This, however, is not the way it is among you. If one of you wants to be great, you must be the servant of the rest; and if one of you wants to be first, you must be the slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served; he came to serve and to give his life to redeem many people." (Mark 10:42-45)

A legitimate government is one which is able to bring peace, development and stability to its people. Any party that continues to fight the war against the innocent citizens of South Sudan has no legitimacy; once you are at war amongst yourselves you have already lost your legitimacy! All the factions of SPLM were part of the government from 2005 to 2013. We applaud the genuine steps forward which were made in establishing the new nation, yet we also saw corruption, nepotism, lack of development, mismanagement of the economy, failure to reform the army, rising tribalism and many other problems. What are our leaders going to do differently from their past track record, and how are they going to do it if they continue fighting? How will the nation move forward if money is spent on weapons of destruction instead of roads, schools, hospitals and development activities? How will we establish a civilian democracy if the nation remains so militarised? We are encouraged by the new agreement signed in Arusha. We want to believe in our leaders' good intentions and to take them at their word, but so far none of the agreements made since January 2014 have been respected. We hope and pray that all parties will be faithful to the Arusha agreement and that, unlike earlier agreements, it will be honoured.

Legitimacy comes from the people. We recognise those who wish to hold an election in June 2015 to ensure that the country retains legitimate and constitutional governance. However we are also aware of many concerns that have been raised as to whether a credible election can really be held at such short notice amidst the current insecurity, and whether obligatory prerequisites such as a Census and the passing of a Permanent Constitution can be fulfilled before the election.

We urge all parties to cooperate to create a consensus so that legitimate governance of the country continues in a transitional manner until such time as a new political dispensation is agreed by all parties. We would add that the future of the country must not be left in the hands of a single political party; all parties, all communities and all citizens should play a part in deciding their future and have a role in implementing it. "If one of you wants to be great, you must be the servant of the rest."

## Other Factors

While the main factors in the war are the dynamics of political power and revenge, there are a number of other contributory factors which cause us concern.

We wish to highlight land issues, which are becoming extremely dangerous. Disputes over land ownership, customary land rights, publicland, grazing rights, land-grabbing, land use, conflicts between pastoralists and farmers, evictions, and demarcation of boundaries are escalating and becoming increasingly violent. A credible Land Commission and Land Act must ensure that coherent land policies and laws are made and implemented. Permanent mechanisms must be set up to deal with all these issues fairly.

Another alarming factor is the armament of the civilian population. Many communities are well-armed with sophisticated and heavy weapons, causing havoc amongst themselves and their neighbouring communities.

This will continue to be a threat to security in South Sudan, even after a peace agreement is reached.

We are also conscious that there may be commanders and communities fighting for their own agendas, even though they might be aligned with one faction or another. We appeal to them to stop fighting immediately, and we believe that they must be drawn into negotiations.

### **South Sudan Council of Churches**

As a founder member of the councils of churches in Sudan and South Sudan, we wish to express our support for the reforms now taking place within the South Sudan Council of Churches. We look forward to continuing to play a central role in the SSCC, and we encourage SSCC to take a leading role in peace and reconciliation. Together let us once again make South Sudan a God-fearing nation.

### **Lenten Call**

As we approach the season of Lent, we reflect on the message of Pope Francis. God is not indifferent to us, but often we are indifferent to others: "we are unconcerned with their problems, their sufferings and the injustices they endure... Our heart grows cold... It is a problem which we, as Christians, need to confront... Lent is a favourable time for letting Christ serve us so that we in turn may become more like him." Let us no longer be indifferent to the suffering and death within our own country. Through prayer and fasting let us grow closer to Christ, and let us all serve our sisters and brothers throughout the nation by our actions for peace and reconciliation.

### **Blessing**

All citizens from any party, faction or community are our sons and daughters. God's love and mercy extend to both the sinner and the saint. We care for all of God's children. We call upon everybody to stop the fighting and killing immediately, and to work together to build a consensus for the long term success of our beloved nation. We offer our prayers and our blessing for all the people of South Sudan, and for all those who care about them and help them.

Given on 30th January 2015 in Juba, South Sudan.