

PRAYER AND COMMENT ON DIALOGUE AND RECONCILIATION

AT BENTIU AND RUWENG CONFERENCE PROMOTED BY UNMISS

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Gospel Reading: Mt 22:12-18.21-35

We like to hear that God is the Good Shepherd, who sets out to seek the lost sheep. We also like our animals and we think they are blameless. We forget that the lost sheep is not so innocent. She got lost because she broke the rules of the flock, maybe not only once, but numerous times. Other shepherds would be fed-up with her and would abandon her to her fate, but the Good Shepherd does not lose hope. He does not give up, but goes to search for the stray people in order to bring them back to his sheepfold. *“I want mercy and not sacrifice. Indeed, I came to call not the upright, but sinners”* (Mt 9:13).

I think we can also understand ourselves like lost sheep. Along our history, every time we went back to conflict, we lost the way. And God came down to look for us and found us in a miserable condition. He raised us and carried us on his shoulders back home. This is a shared condition for all our communities in South Sudan. No one can deny any wrongdoing. At the same time all communities have the perception of having being – sometime in history – a victim of injustice and violence. My question is: how do we allow the Good Shepherd to load us on his shoulders and carry us back home to share the same sheepfold with other sheep?

Jesus, in the Gospel, answers this question: *“Forgive, not seven, but seventy-seven times”* or better still seventy times seven which it makes four hundred ninety. Jesus means, forgive always: 490 times a day. Let forgiveness be so regular that it is like your breath. As our breath is our very life – because when there is no breath there is no life - may forgiveness become your way of life. You have been forgiven, so forgive. Breath in, breath out.

In South Sudan, we often misinterpret the meaning of forgiveness. Archbishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa used to teach that *“Forgiving is not forgetting. It’s actually remembering”*. Remembering helps to avoid that evil may occur again. In fact, the Gospel speaks also of fraternal correction together with forgiveness. Forgiveness does not mean that we become friends with evil. We still denounce it. At the same time, forgiveness is the decision to give up your justified right to hit back. When you forgive, you offer the chance for a new beginning and write a new chapter of history. So, you don’t actually forgive because your enemy deserve your forgiveness, but because you deserve peace, your children deserve peace, and our world deserves peace.

Therefore:

- Forgiveness is a gift that can be given to others, but it is also a gift that can be given to oneself.
- Forgiveness is a choice that can be made to move forward in life and break the cycle of pain.
- Forgiveness is a sign of strength that can help people take back control of their lives.
- Forgiveness is a way to heal oneself and the world, and to free oneself from the past.
- Forgiveness is a way to move forward in life and be free from the mistakes of the past.

Former president of South Africa, Nelson Mandela, was another outstanding witness. As a victim of the apartheid system, he spent many years in prison because of his violent struggle. As he reconciled with the history of his nation and forgave those who had wronged him, he contributed so much to the building of a united nation that would embrace differences rather than rejecting them. He wrote: *“As I walked out the door toward the gate that would lead to my freedom, I knew if I didn’t leave my*

bitterness and hatred behind, I would still be in prison for the rest of my life". There is no freedom without forgiveness; no way to justice and prosperity.

Our communities may find forgiveness very difficult, given the painful memories and losses sustained in the past years. Each community tends to remember negative events more than positive ones. People are taken up by a turmoil of emotions when they identify their own community as the victim, and try to seek justice by their own means. However, if South Sudan is to have any hope of peace, our communities must find the courage to forgive, not just the individuals who have wronged them, but also the larger system that has perpetuated division and violence.

I draw also from my personal experience. After the attack where I got shot and wounded with four bullets, forgiveness freed me from anger, frustration and, most of all, fear. It was because of forgiveness that I could go back to Rumbek. Against any generalisation, I acknowledged that the community was innocent. The evil deed was done by a group of individuals. I was not the only victim. The very same community was also a victim of that single act of violence, and any other form of violence that is perpetuated in our society. The community should not be punished any further. We have to overcome any form of stigmatisation of a group because of their name or their reputation. Each person should be judged for his character and should be respected in his dignity.

In conclusion, dialogue and reconciliation are about creating a new narrative for South Sudan – one where our different communities, instead of seeing each other as enemies, recognise each other as fellow South Sudanese. Mandela's vision of reconciliation emphasises the need for a shared future: *"Reconciliation is not just about forgiving; it's about building something together, a shared future, a common ground"*. Therefore, the dialogue in South Sudan must focus not just on the past but on building a future where all groups can live in harmony. The process of reconciliation, though long and difficult, offers a chance to move forward together, side by side, with dignity and respect, respecting the identity of each group and at the same time building up a common belonging to the same nation.

PEACE WILL COME by Charles de Foucauld

If you believe that shaking hands is stronger than a gun
If you believe that the things that unite men are more important than those that divide them.
If you believe that being different is a richness, not a danger
If you can choose between hope or fear,
If you believe that it's you that has to take the first step, not the other ...
Then peace will come

If the sight of a child still melts your heart
If you can rejoice from the joy of your neighbour
If injustices to others upset you like an injustice to you,
If for you a stranger you meet is a brother
If you share your bread and can add a piece of your heart to it ...
Then peace will come

If you believe that forgiveness has more value than revenge
If you can sing the joy of others, and share their happiness
If you can welcome the poor who is wasting your time, and look at him with sweetness,
If you can welcome and accept a different way of doing things than yours,
If you believe that peace is possible,
Then peace will come

PRAYER FOR PEACE IN SOUTH SUDAN

God the Father of love and mercy,
you created our people from every clan, tribe and nationality.
It is your will that all our people should live in harmony, peace and unity,
because we are all brothers and sisters.
We ask forgiveness for the times we failed to live together in peace.
Heal our offences and help us to reconcile with one another.
Grant to our leaders your divine wisdom
and help us all to promote respect, justice and true reconciliation,
so that the people of South Sudan may live in unity and peace.
We ask this through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.