

PLENARY ASSEMBLY, WAU, 19TH – 28TH OCTOBER 2011

THE CHURCH GOD WANTS US TO BE

A MESSAGE OF THE SUDAN CATHOLIC BISHOPS' CONFERENCE

You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free (John 8:32)

We, the bishops of the Sudan Catholic Bishops' Conference, covering the Republic of Sudan and the Republic of South Sudan, met in Plenary Assembly at the Catholic Health Training Institute in Wau, South Sudan, from 19th - 28th October 2011 to pray and reflect about the new situation in our two nations, and to discern “the Church God wants us to be”.

We remain one bishops' conference covering the two countries. As we wrote during our meeting in April 2011: “We are all children of God, regardless of geographical boundaries, ethnicity, religion, culture, or political affiliation, and we insist on respect for diversity”. The Church in the two nations will continue to be in solidarity due to our shared history and the very real practical and human links between us. We have set up two secretariats, one in Juba and one in Khartoum, to implement the pastoral policies of the bishops in each nation.

During nearly five decades of war, the infrastructure of the Church stayed with the people through its bishops, clergy, religious, catechists and other personnel, alongside our brothers and sisters from other churches. The Church is the people of God; wherever there were people, the Church was there. For much of that time it was the only institution which remained intact on the ground. As well as its pastoral and evangelical role proclaiming the Good News, the Church delivered basic social and humanitarian services and provided leadership and security in the absence of government or in the face of a hostile government. The Church mediated local and national conflicts, and played a decisive role in giving the voiceless a voice in the international arena. The Church will continue to play a public role in both nations. Our role is not political in any partisan sense. Rather we hold our two nations, both governments and citizens, accountable to Gospel values. We confront them with Truth.

To the citizens of the Republic of South Sudan, we repeat what the bishops of South Sudan wrote in September 2011: “we recognise that 'Rome was not built in a day' and that the development of a new nation is a process which will take time. While constantly holding the government to account and always expecting progress, we nevertheless caution citizens to be patient in their demands, to be fair to the government and to allow them time to move forward carefully and in good order.” We emphasise that not only the government, but also all political leaders and citizens, have a responsibility to build the new nation.

To the citizens of the Republic of Sudan, we assure you of our continued presence. The Church is with you and will continue with its programmes which bring hope. We will pray and work for the rule of law, and particularly for a just solution to the question of citizenship.

We remain united in our concern for human dignity, the sanctity of human life, the common good, solidarity and basic human rights. Truth is indivisible. We reject talk of “protection of minorities” and instead insist on the rights of all citizens. We call for respect of human

diversity, created by God, whether ethnic, cultural, linguistic or religious. Human beings are created with God-given dignity and rights, which are spelled out in Catholic Social Teaching, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the African Union Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights.

Our people have displayed great strength, courage and fortitude in the face of war and hardship, but they have been traumatised and cycles of resentment and revenge have been created. Trauma healing is an immediate priority. The Church, by its nature and mission, is a sign of reconciliation, and South Sudanese have demonstrated a remarkable ability to reconcile, both through traditional mechanisms and in the Church-led "People to People Peace Process". Reconciliation within South Sudan will be essential in building a new nation, addressing the grievances and pain of many individuals and ethnic groups who feel they have been mistreated even by the state or those who misuse the powers entrusted to them. However a number of necessary conditions must be in place for this to happen successfully. These include education, security, and a degree of stability and political maturity. Eventually, when the time is ripe, a truth and reconciliation process should be developed. It is to be hoped that, with time, reconciliation (as opposed to mere absence of conflict) will also be possible between the two Republics. The Church will continue to do whatever it can to bring people together in Truth, Justice, Peace, Mercy, Love and Forgiveness.

We are deeply troubled by the ongoing violence in our two nations. Civil war has broken out in the Nuba Mountains / South Kordofan State and in Blue Nile State, alongside the ongoing war in Darfur. We have consistently warned of the danger of a return to hostilities if the legitimate aspirations of the people of these areas were not met. Civilians are being terrorised by indiscriminate aerial bombardment. There is an urgent need to open humanitarian corridors to allow food and medicines to reach those in need. The dispute over the status of Abyei has been militarised. We urge the international community, and particularly our brothers and sisters in the African Union, to ensure that these conflicts are resolved peacefully through the full implementation of the remaining protocols of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement for these three areas, and to assist with outstanding issues between the two nations including citizenship and demarcation of boundaries.

In various parts of South Sudan, ethnic groups and individual leaders resort to violence to resolve their real or perceived disputes. Even as we meet, we hear of fresh conflict in Eastern Equatoria amongst some Madi and Acholi communities. We call for restraint from all concerned to allow their problems to be resolved peacefully. We are aware of tensions over land and boundaries in many parts of South Sudan, and we call on government, traditional leaders, youth and all stakeholders to acknowledge that there is a problem and to use peaceful and legal means to resolve these issues.

The people of Western Equatoria, Western Bahr el Ghazal and neighbouring countries continue to suffer due to the activities of the Lord's Resistance Army. We reject further militarisation of any of these conflicts, and call upon governments and the international community to work for negotiated settlements. We call for increased protection and humanitarian assistance for the affected populations.

We call for open, transparent and democratic governance in both nations. The two nations must learn to live in peace with each other, but also with their own citizens. We reject all policies which oppress, marginalise and dehumanise any citizens. Both countries are poor, and all their energy should be devoted to development and peace. Government, like Church, is called to exercise responsible stewardship. Leadership should be viewed as

service to the community, not personal power or profit, and corruption is unacceptable. Delivery of basic services to the citizens must be prioritised, and the Church will continue to play a major role, particularly in health and education. We recognise new problems of urbanisation, economic hardship, land grabbing and more, and we call upon all stakeholders to address these issues honestly and transparently.

“The Church God wants us to be” is at peace with people of good will in all Christian denominations and all faiths. We thus reaffirm our commitment to ecumenism and inter-religious dialogue. As a founder member of the Sudan Council of Churches and Sudan Ecumenical Forum, we look forward to playing a leading role in the restructuring of ecumenical bodies to reflect the new situation.

At the root of everything are the values of Catholic Social Teaching: human dignity, the common good, a recognition of both rights and duties, option for the poor, care for creation, solidarity, subsidiarity and participation, good governance, and the promotion of peace. Without these Gospel values to inform our consciences, we will not succeed.

We want to give a special word of encouragement to our pastoral agents. We recognise the selfless witness of our priests, religious men and women, catechists, teachers, health workers and other Church personnel, both local and missionary, who are the pillars of the Church. We are aware of the toll it has taken upon them. There is still much work to do: *The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few (Matthew 9:37)*. Go forward with our gratitude, our admiration and our blessing, with renewed commitment for evangelisation.

We call upon the faithful to pray continually, building on our 101 days of prayer for a peaceful referendum and our season of prayer for the Independence of South Sudan. Prayer is at the heart of “the Church that God wants us to be”.

May God bless you, through the intercession of St Josephine Bakhita and St Daniel Comboni.

Given in Wau, Republic of South Sudan, this 28th day of October 2011