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John Ashworth
Fellow of the Rift Valley Institute, Nairobi, Kenya

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An Angry Shepherd: Sudanese Bishop Macram Max Gassis

John Ashworth
Fellow of the Rift Valley Institute
Nairobi, Kenya

Bishop Macram Max Gassis is a near-legendary figure in Sudan since he first spoke out against human rights abuses in his country before a committee of the US Congress in 1988. Targeted by the Islamist military dictatorship which ruled Sudan for thirty years, for protesting enslavement, religious oppression, forced starvation and mass murder in Sudan, he lives in exile, bringing help and hope to his persecuted people.

This essay is condensed from the 2021 book by the same author with the same title.

Keywords: Peace, Justice, Slavery, Islamism, Sudan, Nuba

Introduction

It might seem odd to begin an essay about a “peace bishop” by describing him as “angry”. But this is a term Sudanese Catholic Bishop Macram Max Gassis often uses of himself: an angry bishop. Macram is first and foremost a shepherd and a pastor. The suffering of his flock makes him angry and frustrated, and he is not shy at expressing his anger. He has a strong sense of justice, and consequently injustice makes him angry, particularly when it is caused by human actions, such as the Islamist regimes which have oppressed the people of Sudan, and the power struggles by South Sudanese leaders which are causing untold suffering in that newest of nations. In his own words:

It is not the anger of somebody who wants revenge or wants the destruction of another person. My anger was caused by the suffering of my people, seeing them considered not even as second class citizens but as non-citizens. They are seen as nothing. My anger does not seek revenge, but justice, simple justice, to give the people their rights, to give them what God gave them, their dignity. Just as Jesus showed righteous anger in the Temple, I have the right to imitate Christ. Christ wanted justice; I want justice. Christ was angry; I am angry. It's a dignified anger, an expression of pain even, seeing the crucifixion of my people. Not to be angry would be a contradiction, and would be insensitive. “You, bishop, are our shepherd; do something for us!” I hear their cry! Like a mother who is pained by the suffering of her innocent child, I as a shepherd am pained that innocent people are suffering not because of anything they have done, but because of their identity, their ethnicity, the colour of their skin, their traditions and culture. They are suffering because they are different from the northern Sudanese (quoted in Ashworth, 2021).

Macram is a fighter, and injustice is his target. He will not let go of an issue if he feels justice is at stake. He will not take no for an answer. His prophetic stance has gained him many friends and admirers, but has also made enemies of those who feel challenged by his determination. He has no fear of offending people for the sake of justice. An often formidable figure, he is at

home with the powerful in society as he speaks truth to power and stands up sternly for the rights of the poorest and most vulnerable.

But that does not sum up the whole Bishop Macram. He is equally at home with the grassroots. His gentle side, his kindness, his care and concern for the people around him, are all very evident. There is also a mischievousness, almost an impishness, about him, as he laughs and jokes. Humour is always close to the surface. With a warm and outgoing personality, he is a generous and genial host, renowned for his hospitality, often surprising his friends, staff and priests with unexpected treats.

Macram has been described by many people as a visionary. Amongst those who hold a vision, not all can put it into action and inspire others to follow. Macram is one of the few who can do so, par excellence. His vision of “church” is simple: the people first need water, food, health care, education opportunities, security, peace and justice. “When these basic things are in place I will think about building a church of bricks”. The bishop's understanding of the church is “the people”.

He has gained international visibility due to his passion for justice, particularly his opposition to slavery and religious persecution. He has given testimony to the US Congress in Washington DC and the UN in Geneva, has won a number of international awards, and was once nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize. As one old friend and collaborator says, “It would be a great pity if his life and all he stands for were kept alive only by Sudanese oral tradition”. Through him the humble Church of Sudan provides lessons for the Universal Church.

A Bishop in Exile

In June 1989 Sudan suffered an Islamist military coup d'etat led by Brigadier Omar Hassan al Bashir. Sudan had experienced military regimes before, and had overthrown them in nonviolent popular uprisings in 1964 and 1985. Bashir too was overthrown by a nonviolent *intifada* in 2019. Bishop Macram commented about the most recent one, “I am proud of my Sudanese people, particularly the women and youth who led the uprising. Not a shop was looted, not a car burnt, no violence was offered even when they were provoked by security forces who killed, tortured and raped them. This is truly an example to the world” (quoted in Ashworth, 2021). Sadly elements of the old regime in the military staged a new coup just two years later, and at the time of writing Sudan is once again under military dictatorship, although nonviolent civil resistance continues.

In 1988 Bishop Macram had testified before the US Congress denouncing slavery, the use of food aid to Islamise and Arabise non-Muslim and non-Arab Sudanese people, and the persecution of the church. When the military seized power in 1989 they opened a court case against him. He was asked, “Do you still abide by your public statement that there is religious persecution”, to which he replied, “Yes,” and gave concrete examples, including an attack on a convent following hate speech preached from a mosque. One of the sisters was beaten and sustained a fractured skull. The sisters forgave their attackers and did not try to open a case against the imam who instigated the attack, but Macram believes that Islamists do not see forgiveness as a virtue, as being bold, courageous and strong, but rather as weakness, fear and cowardice. For Christians, love is strength, love is courage. We are not afraid and we are not cowards because we love. “I give you a new commandment: love one another; you must love one another just as I have loved you” (John 13:34). Eventually the case against him was shelved, but Macram's lawyer warned him that it could be reactivated. This played a major role in convincing him that he could not remain in Sudan. The Islamists continued to focus on him,

viewing him as a traitor, because he is a northerner, an Arabic-speaker who can think like them and knows them inside out. They targeted him. They expelled some of the missionaries from his diocese. Macram went to see President Omar al Bashir, and initially it was a friendly enough chat, but it soon became clear that the president's promises were worthless. Eventually Macram threatened to publicise the case in Europe. Bashir procrastinated again and again, and so in 1990 Macram decided to leave his beloved Sudan and begin his life in exile.

He had many friends and benefactors in Germany, Italy and the USA, and it was in the latter that his health broke down and he discovered that he had pancreatic cancer. He underwent major surgery at Georgetown hospital and he was out of the picture in Sudan for several years. He underwent a complex six-hour operation. As a result of the removal of one third of his pancreas, Macram developed serious diabetes, and this is a cross that he still bears. When he awoke, the doctor told him that the operation was successful and there was no need for chemotherapy: "God has given you a new life, for a reason which I don't understand". Macram replied, "I know why God gave me a new life – to be a thorn in the throat of the Islamist fundamentalists!" The doctor was shocked that his weak and skeletal patient should give such a robust reply. Within a year, when the bishop had recovered his strength, he became a globetrotter, giving conferences on human rights, the persecution of Christians and of the African race, slavery, the rape and forced concubinage of Nuba and Dinka women and girls, the killing of the elderly, and the use of food to Islamise and Arabise the non-Arab peoples of Sudan, by the Khartoum regime. The "resurrected" Macram stood up against these atrocities.

By 1996, Sudan's second civil war (1983-2005) was in full swing and it had encroached upon the Nuba Mountains, part of Bishop Macram's Diocese of El Obeid. In the mid-1980s the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) had entered the mountains, but they had treated the local population badly, accusing them of colluding with the Khartoum regime. When they withdrew and Khartoum's armed forces returned, the Nuba people almost welcomed their former oppressors. However the government soldiers behaved even worse than the SPLA, accusing the Nuba of collaborating with the "rebels", and committed ethnic cleansing, creating "peace villages" which were basically concentration camps in which women and girls were routinely raped and violence was the order of the day. Forcible Islamisation and Arabisation were inflicted on the people. Slavery was rife, Christians and people of African traditional religion were persecuted in a new wave of Islamisation, churches were burned, and a Catholic catechist was crucified by government soldiers.

The Nuba Mountains, although part of northern Sudan, is ethnically and culturally connected to the south. The people are fairly evenly divided between Christians, Muslims and followers of African traditional religion. In one family can be found Catholics, protestants, Muslims and traditional religionists; one man might have wives and children from each of the different faiths. They live peacefully together, their shared identity as Nuba being stronger than any religious division. The Nuba Mountains was a major target for Khartoum's forces, partly because of oil and minerals in the region, partly because it was an area within northern Sudan which resisted Islamisation and Arabisation, and partly perhaps because of the more tolerant model of Islam which it embodied, a model which challenged the aggressive Islamist policies of the Khartoum regime. According to Bishop Macram, "Once this nightmare is no more, I'm sure the Nuba are going to be an example to any African country. They know how to live in harmony, whether they're Christians – Catholic or Protestant – Muslims or of African traditional belief: they live in harmony and give an example to other countries what it is to have unity in diversity" (Catholic Relief Services, n.d.). Another Catholic bishop who visited the area, Bishop Kevin Dowling from South Africa, met Nuba imams who complained that

Khartoum characterised them as “bad Muslims” because they lived peacefully with their non-Muslim neighbours. “We are the good Muslims!” they insisted (Ashworth, 2014, p. 22). And Anglican missionary Rev Andrew Wheeler notes, “The sight of Christian soldiers respectfully and quietly watching their Muslim colleagues pray, and of a Muslim community leader encouraging Christians to be more faithful in sharing their faith, would deeply unsettle the regime in Khartoum, and challenge many in the South [of Sudan]” (Wheeler, 2006, p. 139).

An Apostolic Administrator had been appointed to take care of the diocese in Bishop Macram's absence, but it soon became apparent that he was unable to access large parts of the diocese which were under the control of the SPLA, and he also could not care for the people of Abyei who had fled into southern Sudan. As Bishop Macram's health improved, he began to take care of these areas which were inaccessible to the Apostolic Administrator. Macram set up an office in Nairobi and began a pastoral, humanitarian and developmental effort in the name of the Diocese of El Obeid, of which he was still bishop even though another bishop was in place as Apostolic Administrator. It has to be said that this was an uncomfortable situation for both bishops. It was also a fairly unique situation for the Vatican, and there was a great deal of wrangling between supporters and opponents of the two protagonists. As usual, Macram continued his work for justice for the poorest of the poor, brushing aside all opposition.

One of the first steps was to reacquaint himself with the situation on the ground in his diocese from which he had been absent for several years due to his health. This author accompanied the bishop on that fateful trip and recalls:

Bishop Macram Max Gassis lay on the ground under the partial shade of a thorn bush by the side of the steep track leading up into the mountains. He had collapsed halfway into the four-hour walk from the airstrip to the hill-top parish of Lumon. All he could say was that he needed his pills but had forgotten to bring them. The local SPLA commander delegated to escort him, a Muslim, was very worried. Who knew what would happen to him if a bishop died on his watch? Rev Andrew Wheeler of the Episcopal Church of Sudan and myself, travelling with the bishop, were afraid that we would soon be burying him, but as a last resort Andy opened the bishop's bag and emptied all his possessions onto the dusty ground. There, hidden right at the bottom, was the missing medicine. Soon after taking it, the bishop was able to continue his journey.

That day in 1997 we flew with Bishop Macram in an old DC3 from Kenya. We had already suffered engine failure over southern Sudan, making an emergency landing in Panyagor, near Bor. Fortunately this was an area controlled by SPLA; it doesn't bear thinking about what would have happened to the bishop if we had been forced to land in Government of Sudan territory... After the crew had repaired the engine, we took off again and made the dangerous flight into the Nuba Mountains, landing at an airstrip at the foot of the hills. (Ashworth, 2014, p. 141-42)

No bishop of any denomination had been able to visit these parts of the Nuba Mountains for many years. Not only Catholics but all denominations, even those which don't have bishops

(and even those which don't approve of bishops) rejoiced that "Our bishop has come!" Even the Muslims repeated the same welcome, "Our bishop has come!"

The bishop was shattered by the situation of the people in the Nuba Mountains. No health facilities, no education, no clean water. One of his first concerns was water, a passion which is never far from his mind and heart: "Water is life; no water is death; brackish water is sickness". He found the people digging in dry river beds and scooping dirty water out with a calabash. He appealed to various organisations to provide assistance, but to no avail. Eventually he lobbied in the USA where, with the help of Congressman Frank Wolf and Senator Sam Brownback, he was able to get funding from USAID, channelled through Catholic Relief Services, for a mobile drilling rig. To date the bishop has drilled more than 250 boreholes to provide clean water for the people, more than any other organisations in these areas.

The leaders of the SPLA, the de facto local government in the Nuba Mountains, asked the bishop for only two further things: education and health care. Education had been lacking in the area as successive governments in Khartoum had marginalised the Nuba people. As well as building and running schools, there was therefore an urgent need to train local teachers, so the bishop built a teacher training institute which is now successfully turning out Nuba teachers. The added value of the Church schools, apart from the simple fact that they run effectively unlike government schools, is that they offer formation as well as education.

In the "liberated territory" of the Nuba Mountains there was no hospital serving a population of several hundred thousand people, but to make matters worse, they were completely trapped by the war and could not even travel to reach the few hospitals on the other side of the front line, the boundary between territory controlled by the SPLA and government-controlled areas. It was left to the bishop to build the Bishop Gassis Mother of Mercy Hospital in Gidel, greatly helped by his Italian benefactors. Visitors are often amazed that such a beautiful medical facility can exist deep in the bush in a war zone. The hospital expanded from its designed eighty beds to several hundred to meet the needs of people wounded by the incessant shelling and aerial bombing by the Khartoum regime. The hospital itself has been bombed, fortunately without any serious damage or casualties. There is an outreach programme to local clinics, a team of specialists have visited regularly to carry out eye operations, and the hospital also provides prosthetic limbs for the victims of bombing and shelling, many of whom were flown to Uganda for follow up treatment.

The bishop's work is not limited to the Nuba Mountains. The contested area of Abyei is also in the Diocese of El Obeid. This area of the Ngok Dinka people was originally in southern Sudan but was transferred to northern Sudan by the Condominium (colonial) government in 1905. In the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement it was agreed that the people of Abyei should be granted a referendum to choose whether to remain in northern Sudan or to rejoin the south. That referendum has never taken place (although an unofficial referendum, not recognised by officialdom, showed a large majority in favour of returning to the south, now the independent nation of South Sudan) and the Dinka residents of Abyei were persecuted by the Khartoum regime and local Arab militias, leading to the majority of them being displaced from their homes and moving to Twic County in South Sudan. Bishop Macram visited Abyei and witnessed the desecration of the church and the destruction of the town. Even the fruit trees were cut down, but the minaret of the mosque was left standing. As a result, he cares for these people from his own diocese, with the permission of the bishop of the Catholic Diocese of Wau where they now find themselves. There he has built yet another a hospital, dedicated to Mother Theresa, as well as schools and parishes.

Although it is the humanitarian work which attracts most of the attention and funding, first and foremost in the bishop's heart is the pastoral mission of the Church, which also of course includes the humanitarian side. Several parishes operate under his auspices in Nuba and Twic, and he has cared for and supported many pastoral personnel - priests, brothers and sisters - from as far afield as South Sudan, Sudan, Eritrea, Poland, Italy, UK, USA, Uganda, Kenya, South America and Australia.

The Journey to Exile

Macram Max Gassis was born in an ecumenical family in Khartoum on 21st September 1938, with Coptic Orthodox and protestant evangelical influences on his mother's side and a Catholic father. He grew up embracing all peoples and creeds, with the motto, "Religion is for God and the country is for all". Macram's father's house shared a courtyard with Sudan's second Prime Minister, Abdallah Khalil, who was like an uncle to Macram, also helping with his school fees. The young Macram once asked, referring to the first military regime in Sudan, "Uncle Abdallah, did you hand the government to the military?" Khalil replied, "My son, democracy is not chaos".

Macram went on to join the Comboni Missionaries, studying first in UK and then Italy, and was ordained priest on 28th June 1964. It was a difficult time for a non-white priest in a European missionary society, but Macram stood up for justice within the church just as he did later in a broader sphere. He is fluent in English, Italian and Arabic, but loves his native Arabic and often uses Arabic proverbs to illustrate a point. "*Yom assal, yom basal*" is a favourite - "one day honey, one day onions", referring to the ups and downs of life. Macram feels strongly that missionaries must immerse themselves in, accept and adapt to the languages, traditions and cultures of the people amongst whom they work. "I cannot sit in my country and listen to a foreign language".

Inculturation and incarnation are important theological and pastoral themes. Evangelisation seeks not to impose an alien European Christian culture onto the people, but rather to discover whatever is of Christ in the local culture and to build on it to develop an indigenous Christianity, which may not always look like that of Europe or north America. That great missionary St Paul said to the people of Athens, "I have seen for myself how extremely scrupulous you are in all religious matters, because, as I strolled round looking at your sacred monuments, I noticed among other things an altar inscribed: To An Unknown God. In fact, the unknown God you revere is the one I proclaim to you" (Acts 17:22-23). The opening verses of John's gospel make a powerful statement: "The Word became flesh, and lived among us" (John 1:14). Scripture scholars tell us the literal translation would be "and pitched his tent among us", which is also literally what many missionaries did. Like St Paul, the Second Vatican Council reminds us that God is to be found in other faith traditions:

The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions. She regards with sincere reverence those ways of conduct and of life, those precepts and teachings which, though differing in many aspects from the ones she holds and sets forth, nonetheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all people. Indeed, she proclaims, and ever must proclaim Christ "the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14:6), in whom people may find the fullness of religious life, in whom God has reconciled all things to Himself (*Nostrae aetate*, 2).

It is the task of missionaries to proclaim Christ and to build on the existing foundations of what is “true and holy” that they find amongst their people, just as Jesus built on the Jewish religion of his time, saying, “Do not imagine that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets. I have come not to abolish but to complete them” (Matthew 5:17). In the words of Pope Francis, “it has always been the case that the proclamation of Jesus’ salvation reaches people right where they are and just how they are in the midst of their lives in progress” (Brockhaus, 2020). With God's help, may the missionaries continue to reach the people “where and how they are” and to complete the work of Christ.

Fr Macram served in various parishes in the Archdiocese of Khartoum until in 1974 he was chosen by the Sudan Catholic Bishops' Conference (SCBC) to be its Secretary General. It was a difficult decision for him, as he wanted to study in the USA, but he accepted the call and was to spend the next nine years building up the young episcopal conference. He established a permanent secretariat in Khartoum, a beautiful new building once again helped by Italian benefactors, but equally importantly he built up the infrastructure of the conference.

In October 1983 Fr Macram Max Gassis was appointed Apostolic Administrator of the Diocese of El Obeid. Five years later he was appointed Bishop of El Obeid, and his episcopal ordination occurred on 15th May 1988. Macram chose as his episcopal motto *MANE NOBISCUM DOMINE*, which means “Remain with us Lord”, the words of the disciples to whom Jesus showed himself after his resurrection (Luke 24:29).

The Diocese of El Obeid was not in a good state; indeed Macram describes it as “a shambles”. The government had never accepted his predecessor Bishop Paulino Lukudu Loro (who became Archbishop of Juba). He was a southern Sudanese, and as such an outsider. In addition, the Comboni missionaries - priests, brothers and sisters – who made up the majority of the personnel in El Obeid were squabbling amongst themselves. At the time of his appointment, Fr Macram was not at all sure that he wanted the position. He had been studying Canon Law and Church Administration at Catholic University in Washington DC. He had returned to the SCBC Secretariat, but wanted to continue his studies. The nuncio, Archbishop Giovanni Moretti, whom Macram respected, pleaded with him and offered to help him find new personnel for the diocese. Macram's good friend Archbishop (later Cardinal) Gabriel Zubeir in Khartoum urged him “Macram, if you love the church and love Sudan, say yes! If you say no, Rome will appoint somebody who will be a thorn in our side!” So Macram agreed.

Once all that was out of the way, Macram wasted no time in organising the diocese. He reopened parishes, created new ones, and brought new missionary priests and sisters into the diocese. He forged good relations with Muslims and with many of the government and security officials, although some still obstructed him. Security concerns were never far from the new bishop's mind. Despite his good relations with many government officials and other Arabs and Muslims, there were plenty of hard-liners in El Obeid. The bishop's residence in El Obeid backed onto the national security headquarters, so when chatting on the veranda in the evenings one had to keep one's voice down. Macram demonstrated that we Christians do not take revenge nor hold grudges. Although he did construct many buildings, nevertheless his priority was building the community rather than physical structures.

Macram began building health facilities, something for which he would later become well known. In particular he built a much-needed maternity hospital in the town of Dilling, which still operates as part of his legacy, dedicated to Mother (now Saint) Bakhita. The bishop also

obtained two fully-equipped mobile clinics, mounted on four-wheel drive Magirus lorries (ironically the same type of lorry used extensively by the Sudanese army at the time) and a Fiat water tanker. In El Obeid town there was a Comboni Secondary School but the Comboni missionaries were struggling to staff it, so Macram brought Maltese lay missionaries

In 1984, early in Macram's tenure in El Obeid, the region faced a major famine. Aid agencies flocked to the area, and the Catholic response was led by a large team from CAFOD, the English and Welsh member of Caritas Internationalis. They based themselves in El Obeid and the area allocated to them was to the west of the city, around En Nahud. To the credit of CAFOD and the bishop, when the project ended the sheikhs around En Nahud expressed their appreciation of the famine relief effort. "When you first came, we were very suspicious that a Christian NGO working in a Muslim area would favour the Christians or even use food aid to proselytise. We are so grateful that you proved us wrong by distributing food to those in need regardless of religion".

The bishop's house in El Obeid was known for being generous and welcoming. "He always treated me with kindness and respect" is a refrain heard over and over again from those who have met Macram. "Even though I had just met him, I felt at ease talking to him, like we were friends already. He had that Arab gift of hospitality, making a visitor feel welcome, like a friend" recalls Mill Hill Missionary Fr Peter Major.

During all this period Macram was frequently away from his diocese, having to go to Khartoum to assist Archbishop Gabriel Zubeir with government and security issues. Many have been impressed by Macram's close relationship with Zubeir. They worked "in tandem" to solve difficult issues at the national level, such as visas for expatriate personnel, import licences for Sudanaid (the national Caritas), renewal of radio licences, release of vehicles held at customs, and permits for schools and multi-purpose centres. Macram was an outspoken critic of the Khartoum regime, alongside the archbishop. In some ways he saw himself as Aaron to Zubeir's Moses, speaking out with his command of Arabic while Zubeir strategised. Bishop Macram's position is unique. He is from a Syrian-Egyptian-Darfuri Catholic-Protestant-Coptic Arabic-speaking family in Sudan, and is the only Sudanese bishop of Arab background. The government feared him more than they would a southerner, as he was Arab through and through; he knew them, could think like them, speak their language perfectly and could often out-manoeuvre them. His life was threatened and thus he had to flee into exile.

International Advocacy for Peace and Justice

As well as his work on the ground in Sudan, the bishop is well known for his international advocacy efforts. "This is one thing I did for my people. I was their voice before the international community". He has never been afraid to speak out nor to take risks, even when it meant threats to his own life. As early as 1988 he testified before the UN Human Rights Commission, an engagement which he repeated for five consecutive years, and it was this which really raised the ire of the Khartoum regime. His voice is internationally respected (even if he sometimes makes more cautious colleagues a little uncomfortable, seeing him as a bit of a loose cannon, or in his own words, a "misguided missile"!) and he has made it heard in some of the highest quarters in the world, including UN Secretary General Boutros Boutros Ghali, US Secretaries of State Colin Powell, who has called the bishop "brother" (Duin, 2005), and Madeleine Albright, German Chancellor Helmut Kohl, UK Prime Minister John Major, Irish Presidents Michael Higgins, Mary Robinson and Mary McAleese, Italian President Oscar Luigi Scalfaro, and of course Pope John Paul II.

For many years the bishop has been making annual visits to the USA. Over the last few years his advocacy has reached the UN, the US State Department, USAID, various embassies to the UN (including the Sudan and South Sudan ambassadors), interested members of the US House and Senate and their staff, the US Institute for Peace (USIP), the Africa Faith and Justice Network, the US Commission on International Religious Freedom, the Enough Project, the Knights of Columbus, and many other organisations.

Bishop Macram has been an outspoken critic of the Islamist military regime in Khartoum, not from the perspective of a partisan politician but rather as an advocate for the suffering poor and marginalised. His language often reflects this stance. In 2004, for instance, referring to the war in Darfur, he said, “The government must behave like a father who has a problem with his son and sits down to talk to solve it together” (Fides Service, 2004) although he could also be harsh. Catholic Social Teaching and Liberation Theology both highlight a preferential option for the poor, the concept of the common good, a prophetic stance, fearlessly speaking truth to power. A true prophet draws the attention of those in power, those who are part of the dominant establishment, to the dysfunctional situation, and envisages a better future. It has not been an easy path for Bishop Macram, but he has not flinched from what he sees as his sacred duty. He has paid the price – exile from his country, the breakdown of his health, physical hardships, death threats, attempts to smear and discredit him (including the loss of a fund-raising organisation which he set up in the USA), and particularly painful for him, the effects his exile has had on his relatives in Khartoum.

Macram goes on to explain how the Sudanese bishops operated in an environment like this.

Well, we haven't been quiet. You have to bear in mind that my brother bishops who live and operate in areas under the control of the Khartoum regime cannot say very much. But I have to bow my head in awe and respect for them, because the way they have handled the situation is really exemplary. For us who are on the other side, in areas that are controlled by the Sudanese People's Liberation Army, we can raise our voices and we can speak out. (quoted in Ashworth, 2021)

One of the issues on which both the Catholic bishops and the ecumenical church leaders were outspoken was the right of self-determination. The Sudan Ecumenical Forum produced an authoritative and influential paper on self determination in 2002 entitled “Let my people choose!”, and Bishop Macram said:

We are saying that the south, the Nuba Mountains and all the marginalised areas have the right to self-determination. Self-determination is not a "wishy-washy" issue; it is part and parcel of the human rights struggle. Second, they should separate religion from politics. We cannot say Sudan is an "Islamic" country, we cannot say Sudan is an "Arab" country. We should not and we cannot, because Sudan is a multiracial, multicultural, multireligious country. I simply don't understand why the regime in Khartoum thinks that this variety, this pluralism and this diversity is something that would impoverish the nation. Just look at the United States. (quoted in Ashworth, 2021)

An issue dear to Macram's heart is slavery. Many in Europe and north America find it difficult to believe that slavery still exists even up to now. Abduction of southern Sudanese, Nuba and other marginalised peoples has existed in Sudan for centuries and continues today. The non-Arab peoples of Sudan are routinely referred to as *abiid* (slaves) as well as *hiawaan* (animals)*. During the civil war, the government relied heavily on the use of militia. The most well-known was the *janjawiid*, which was later given the title Rapid Support Forces, and its most notorious commander, known as Hemeti, is now part of the ruling council in Sudan. The militia were supported with arms and ammunition, but were not paid. Their pay was whatever they could loot, including slaves. These militia raped, killed and looted throughout the Nuba Mountains, Darfur and the northern parts of southern Sudan.

As a pastor Macram's heart was touched by the plight of slaves, and he was a supporter of “slave redemption”, where slaves were “bought” using funds from foreign benefactors so that they could be freed and returned to their families. Not everybody agreed with this practice, and many of its critics argued that the focus should be on ending the war and the oppressive dictatorships which facilitated and encouraged slavery. The issue is not, perhaps, slave redemption *per se*, but rather a critique of some outsiders who focused only on redemption rather than holistically seeing the institution of slavery as part of a bigger picture. That accusation cannot be levelled at Macram. While supporting the redemption of individual slaves, he worked tirelessly for justice and peace, an end to war, and for the liberation of all the peoples of Sudan.

One recurring theme for Bishop Macram has been the children of Sudan. It can be seen in his abhorrence of child sexual abuse, but it often surfaces in his Christmas messages, which are a form of advocacy. A religious sister who worked with the bishop recalls:

I was sitting with Macram at the table on the front veranda. He was sharing his concerns regarding the child soldiers. He had some photos of some of the children that had been found and that were in the process of being rehabilitated. Before showing me the photos he said, “You may not want to see these. They show the pain of child. Their eyes speak. Their bodies speak.” (quoted in Ashworth, 2021)

Influences

Where did Bishop Macram's lifelong passion for peace and justice spring from? He himself traces it firmly back to his parents and his upbringing. He comes from an ecumenical family, Catholic, Protestant and Coptic Orthodox. While he is outspoken against the Islamisation and Arabisation policies of successive Islamist regimes in Khartoum, nevertheless he speaks fondly of his social interaction with the ordinary Muslims of Sudan, and he has many Muslim friends. His parents both had a strong sense of justice; even today Macram still clearly remembers the time a southern Sudanese collapsed in the ditch outside his childhood home, and his parents carried the stranger indoors, put him to bed, and cared for him until he recovered the next morning - the parable of the Good Samaritan in action! He also grew up rightly proud of his own Sudanese culture, which led him later to work for inculturation within the Church long before he had ever heard that term.

While the peace and justice work of many of the bishops mentioned in this august organ may be attributed to the reforms brought about by Vatican II, Macram and his fellow Sudanese bishops might be the exception. During the 1960s and well into the '70s Sudan was cut off from

the outside world by civil war and an Islamist military dictatorship. Sudanese Christians were focused on their own survival, and were sadly out of touch with what was happening in the wider Church. The Church was dominated by elderly missionaries who had little time or energy to pay attention to Vatican II. The transition from a missionary Church to an indigenous local Church was beginning, but the handful of Sudanese bishops were young and inexperienced and did not have the confidence to challenge this large bloc of foreign priests and religious who formed the majority, and who often opposed any reforms which the bishops tried to initiate.

It would seem, therefore, that Macram came to an understanding of the importance of values such as peace, justice, ecumenism and inculturation in parallel to rather than because of Vatican II. The Sudanese Church entered the realm of peacebuilding in the same way that it entered the field of humanitarian aid, because it seemed to be a natural part of its pastoral ministry, and because in Sudan there was often nobody else to do it. In many respects they were experimenting with a praxis theology, a pastoral theology, eventually even a form of liberation theology, but it remained at the level of “praxis” and was never articulated into a “theology”. They were affirmed and encouraged when they eventually began to internalise Vatican II.

Still Active

In 2013 Bishop Macram officially retired at the age of 75, and the Diocese of El Obeid got a new bishop as opposed to an apostolic administrator. One might well have thought that the Bishop Emeritus could step back and enjoy a peaceful retirement. Indeed that had seemed to be a possibility following the signing of a Comprehensive Peace Agreement in 2005. Sadly conflict had already broken out again in the Nuba Mountains even before the independence of South Sudan in 2011, and once again the diocesan administration in El Obeid was unable to access that part of the diocese; Macram stepped up to shoulder the burden anew. A mere two years later the new nation of South Sudan descended into a fratricidal civil war, and again Macram found himself in demand to provide pastoral and humanitarian services to the suffering people. He founded a new organisation, the Bishop Gassis Relief and Rescue Foundation, and supported by a dedicated and professional staff continues not only with humanitarian and pastoral activities but also advocacy for peace and justice. Nevertheless, age and illness take their toll and the bishop is having to slow down a bit as he approaches his 84th birthday. He and his collaborators are seeking to ensure that the work will continue once he is no longer able to devote so much time and energy to leading BGRRF. But whatever happens, it seems certain that this angry “peace bishop” will still be heard as he continues to amplify the voice of his suffering people to the world, and to work for peace and justice in Sudan and South Sudan.

John Ashworth has worked with the church in Sudan and South Sudan since 1983, and has also lived in Uganda, Kenya and South Africa. His career has spanned teaching, missionary priesthood, the humanitarian sector, and for the last twenty years or so, advocacy, peace and reconciliation. He is the author of "The Voice of the Voiceless: The Role of the Church in the Sudanese Civil War 1983-2005" (2014) and "An Angry Shepherd: Sudanese Bishop Macram Max Gassis" (2021), and in 2022 will publish "Pastor, Peacebuilder, Statesman: Rev Dr Haruun Ruun Lual", all published by Paulines Publications Africa. John holds an MA in Spirituality from Gonzaga University, Spokane, USA,

Endnotes

* Even today in 2022: 'One of them was heard to say: "This 'slave' with his ugly nose irritates me." The Arabic word for slave, "abd", is often used in Sudan to refer to people whose perceived roots are thought to be African instead of Arab - and is a derogatory term used to describe black people'... cf “Sudan anger over racist slur caught on air at Bashir trial”, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-61112459>

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