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**A Beacon of Hope in a Troubled Context:
Sketches of the Life of Mons. Paride Taban, Shepherd and Bridge-builder**

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Monsignor Paride Taban, Bishop emeritus of the Diocese of Torit in Southern Sudan, is a multifaceted figure. Apart from his role as pastor and religious leader, he is an outstanding peace builder and the co-founder of the New Sudan Council of Churches, one of the most significant civil society institutions during the second civil war (1983 – 2005). This institution spearheaded numerous ecumenical initiatives including development work, humanitarian relief, training of grass-roots leaders and last but not least peace mediation. He is a relentless fighter for peaceful coexistence and tolerance in an environment marked by violence, oppression and impunity and with the background of a turbulent past. Apart from his many personal achievements, he is an outstanding witness of the recent history of the country.

Introduction

When we talk about efforts to bring about positive social transformation in a conflict and post-conflict situation, the Catholic Church in Sudan and Southern Sudan¹ can be described as one of the most relevant social actors along that challenging path. In an environment where discrimination, oppression and continuous violation of Human Rights seem to prevail, religious leaders were almost the only moral authorities to which people could resort.

With this in mind, it is not surprising to acknowledge that to the eyes of many local and international actors, Bishop Paride Taban is considered one of the most relevant Sudanese church leaders of the 20th century (see Holy Trinity Peace Village Kuron, n.d.). With the passing of time, and particularly with the background of the challenging period since the achievement of independence as a country, his legacy and his example shine more strongly than ever. He is one of these remarkable figures whose words and actions should not fall into oblivion, especially among the youth who have grown surrounded by attitudes of hatred and animosity. In this essay I attempt to present the different facets of such an outstanding personality.

The Sudanese

Bishop Paride Taban has a deep identification with the different traditions and cultures of Southern Sudan. Though many national leaders on the political scene are often have a bias toward their ethnic origin and the interests of their original tribe, Paride Taban shows pride in being born and bred in the “cosmopolitan”, multi-ethnic and multilingual environment of Katire. His father’s house was an open space for all who desired to share experiences or to meet others regardless of language, origin, religion or social background. In such a privileged atmosphere, the young Paride picked up not only words but also many cultural elements and traditions of different tribal groups. Such wide knowledge came in extremely handy in later stages of his life, since it would provide unique entry points in the interaction with various ethnic groups and tribes.

Mons. Taban takes incredible pleasure in ancient stories which he borrows from the traditions and cultures, which he knows so well. This point should by no means be underestimated: many of the present and past problems of Southern Sudan (and of the pre-independence country under

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Sudan) go back to massive injustice, discrimination and conflict that has been fuelled along ethnic and tribal lines. Those who know the modern history of Sudan after British rule definitely will be acquainted with the local expression *kokora*, a strategy cunningly used by the Khartoum rulers. This word meant the malevolent use of a certain issue in order to deliberately create dissension among Southern tribal leaders, states or constituencies. Targeted groups of leaders would receive certain privileges or benefits so that any potential overarching consensus on other issues would be completely unfeasible, much like a Sudanese version of the ancient *divide et impera* maxim. The *kokora* was regularly used and it often bore abundant fruits for the policies of the central government, much to the South's disadvantage.

With this background in mind and with the deep knowledge of how certain leaders and groups in the South were mere pawns in the hands of skilled political strategists, Paride Taban often addressed any alleged grievances of any group and sought a common ground to build up understanding and social cohesion. In different countries outside the Sudan, he met Southern Sudanese refugees involved in internal ethnic struggles and in such situations, he tried to bring them together by appealing to their humanity, talking to them as brothers and sisters – not as members of a particular group or clan – and stressing common points that they could agree upon, rather than partisan interests that stir up destructive feelings or sow discord. Many of the basic elements of peacebuilding used by him would be real tales, proverbs and traditions. He never used the identity or the prominence of a certain group in detriment of others. Rather the contrary: he always portrayed the positivity and the challenges found in a certain tale in order to invite others to reflect on themselves and their own attitudes and bring out their better selves.

Servant of a martyrial Church

Paride grew in the shadow of a missionary and colonially shaped Church in the middle of South Sudan. The policy of “spheres of influence” implemented by British authorities allocated geographical areas to certain Churches or missionary institutes and such policy moulded the landscape of the region. Paride's ancestral home fell into one of the territories apportioned to the Catholic Church and, contrary to what happened in other places that opposed formal education for the children, the Ma'di tribe of Equatoria regionⁱⁱ was delighted with the opportunity of sending their children to missionary schools.

Education was for the Catholic Church one of the main tools for evangelisation and the environment around the Christian community eventually became one of the most active social spaces in each village. The Christian message definitely left a very deep mark in that area. Paride was impressed about the social and pastoral initiatives he saw around him and he decided to join in its ranks.

The bigger picture, however, was not so auspicious as the situation in that small corner. Sudan was on its way to becoming independent and the bloody uprising of the Equatorial Corps of Torit in 1955, due to differences between Southern Sudanese troops and Arab officers, was only an example of what the future had in store for the region. Before the country reached its independence on 1st January 1956, the first civil war was already raging in some areas of Southern Sudan.

Only twenty days after gaining its independence, Sudan – a country with a very relevant percentage of non-Arab population – entered the Arab League. Such an omen could not have a

positive interpretation in the South, where the Church had already become a prominent social actor. The Khartoum government was fully aware of the increasing importance and of the growing influence of Christianity in different parts of the South. Members of Islamist groups and those who later on were known as the NIF (National Islamic Front) started very soon influencing and shaping the politics of Sudan and this started with the school: Scholastic textbooks were altered so as to give the impression that the “real” story of the country started only with the Arab invasions of the 9th and 10th century. Whatever happened before this point of time (including the grandiose civilisations of Nubia and Kush with their awesome pyramids) was simply labelled as *era of ignorance*. Old cultures and kingdoms were officially obliterated from the scholastic curricula and the only reason was that they were neither Islamic nor Arab in origin. This also had a further implication: the role of Christianity in Old Sudan was either ignored or at most merely considered a mere anecdote. To the minds of fundamentalist rulers – an argument often portrayed by thinkers who label Christianity as a “non-African” religion – Christianity did not belong to the history of Sudan and therefore it should not be taken into account. The rulers of Khartoum thus made sure that the profile of Christian institutions would remain as low as possible.

The problem became evident when the government started implementing a harassment strategy towards clergy and lay leaders. In the span of a few years, incidents involving persecution, mistreatment and even targeted elimination of Christians of different denominations became a commonplace. Some of the stories of that period belong to the most impressive pages of modern African Church history. They are a powerful testimony to the bravery and determination of quite a few Christian leaders who stood up against intolerance and hate.

Very soon, as a young priest, Paride had to take over important leading roles in a Church that was externally blown away due to the enforcement of the “Missionary Societies Act” and the subsequent massive expulsion of foreign missionaries of 1964. In a matter of few days, most of the foreign Catholic and Protestant missionaries were expelled from the country. That decision severely damaged the very structure of the main missionary groups; the obvious intention was to behead a thriving Church and to prevent the implementation of more evangelisation efforts. This radical move meant, on the one hand, the realisation by local Christians that, if the Christian message was something really worth implementing, they had to take over the development of their Church, and on the other it created a great exodus of key cadres to some other areas, even to the North of the country where most of Christians belonged to foreign groups (Syrians, Greek, Lebanese, etc.). Though the persecution was a real trauma for the Sudanese Church, it also brought about an unprecedented push to evangelising efforts in other regions.

In this dire situation, Paride as a priest already showed some of his most outstanding personal features. Apart from leading the Christian community, he also enjoyed and valued manual work as an essential part of his priestly ministry; this was for him a source of dignity and self-pride. In the places where he was deployed, no matter whether it was a mission or a seminary, he could easily be found carrying out the tasks of a blue-collar worker - under the chassis of a Land-Rover or repairing a water pump - as well as in his office receiving people. Especially in the critical period when foreign missionaries were gone and most of their financial revenues from overseas were no longer available, he renewed his belief in the testimony and the intrinsic value of a self-reliant Church that depends on itself rather than on external handouts. His vision

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encompassed a closely-knit community that is united in faith but that also undertakes financial ventures (communal mills, agricultural projects, small enterprises and cooperatives) that would benefit local livelihoods, especially of those most in need. In such enterprises, not everybody would share Paride's high ethical standards and quite a few projects suffered under mismanagement at the hands of greedy or unscrupulous individuals, but this did not dishearten him and he stubbornly pushed on, fully immune to discouragement.

Paride was eventually chosen as shepherd to lead his flock, specifically in a situation where the missionary bishops were giving way to new shepherds coming from the secular local clergy. Just one year after Paride's consecration as bishop, Bishop Zubeir Wako was appointed Archbishop of Khartoum, the first time after a line of ten foreign missionaries in which a local prelate was ever at the helm of the Sudanese Church. These were changes that took place despite internal and external resistance. The local church suffered under sizeable growing pains and, in this stage, it had to be prepared for the worse, since the second civil war period (1983-2005) was about to set on.

After the relatively stable period that followed the Addis Ababa agreement in 1972 that ended the first Civil War (1955 – 1972), President Nimeiri had a change of heart and started implementing a new strategy aimed at his own political survival. He left behind his original Socialist and Marxist ideology and, in order to get the most necessary support of Islamist groups, he moved towards more radical positions, also on the religious scene. He went back on many of his promises: Shari'a Law was introduced in the country and, contrary to the Addis Ababa peace agreement, he dissolved the southern Sudanese government. Disappointment and anger piled up: Civil War erupted again and the suffering of many a Sudanese continued.

All this meant a renewed and more massive pressure on the Church, its activities and its leaders. At that critical juncture, one of the new ecumenical initiatives aimed at mitigating the scourges of violence, suffering and poverty caused by the war was the New Sudan Council of Churches (NSCC), an endeavour spearheaded by Bishop Taban together with Bishop Nathanael Garang of the Episcopal Church.

In the face of hopelessness and hostility, in times of cultural, political and even religious sectarianism, Christian churches wanted to reach out to the poorest and most destitute of society and become a tangible sign of humanity, compassion and tenderness. In Paride's view, the Christian Church would be fulfilling its primal call only if it becomes a Samaritan church, if she is able to "see" the suffering of others and show care to the brother or sister lying wounded by the roadside.

During the worst years of the civil war, the NSCC incarnated the verse in Matthew's Gospel "whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me" (Mt. 25: 40) and it brought relief and hope to many, despite its limited means. Paride's attitude was particularly manifest in the almost suicidal undertaking of organising a convoy that provided much necessary relief to the beleaguered city of Torit. He did not hesitate to put himself in harm's way in order to reach out to people affected by a terrible situation of famine and scarcity. He achieved his risky goal, but soon after the fall of Torit, he together with some fellow priests was imprisoned by the rebel SPLA (Sudan People's Liberation Army).

Evidence of Paride's true pastoral and human calibre was shown in the most dire months of his imprisonment, together with his companions whose "sin" had been to stand by the citizens of Torit up to the last moment of its conquest at the hands of the rebel army. They suffered captivity and humiliation simply because they were true shepherds tending to a most needy flock. It looked as if his vision of service and surrender to others would reach new levels of depth and meaning in the silent testimony given from a prison cell. In this difficult situation, he was aware that he was not on his own, but he was supported by many concerned groups within the Sudan and all around the world.

The pontiff

No other social actor in Southern Sudan is so deeply embedded in the social tissue as the Church. Even tribal chiefs could eventually be "bought" and manipulated, local governments and politicians could easily fall prey to corruption or to political ambition... but faith-based communities and many of its leaders kept grounded in their environment and they displayed high levels of moral authority each time they provided a ray of hope and of strength to disheartened people in the most dire moments of their existence.

Any description of Mons. Paride legacy would be most incomplete without this profoundly ethical dimension since he never grew tired of championing manifold peace-building efforts. He truly deserves the ancient title of *pontifex* (bridge maker) because of his untiring efforts to bring people together and promote peace and social cohesion not only in the local level, but also between armed factions and political families. Unfortunately, the environment of Southern Sudan hardly ever runs short of opportunities for mediation and conflict transformation.

Not much has been comprehensively documented about the role of the Churches in bringing about social awareness, carrying out mediation or implementing peace efforts in Southern Sudan. One of the main reasons of such little documentation is the fact that, while some peace building initiatives had the advantage of being backed up by ample financial support and a high-profile media visibility, the Church could barely afford the means and the methods of more powerful actors.ⁱⁱⁱ Most of the time, peace initiatives carried out by church actors would be extremely unsophisticated, behind the scenes and in very simple set-ups. Names of initiatives like *People to People Peace Process*, or the *Entebbe Process*, *Kisumu conference or Peace from the roots* might not ring a bell in the ears of today's Southern Sudanese, but they were in their time pivotal enterprises in which the Churches, in a unique ecumenical endeavour, invested precious time and energy in which plenty of grassroots mobilisers and volunteers were trained in tasks of mediation and dissemination of basic peace-building principles. Some of these initiatives were successful, some were not, but both the successes and the failures paved the way to renewed efforts that brought – or tried to bring about – peace on the basis of reconciliation and forgiveness.

Unlike some other NGO-led "hit and run" peace processes, the initiatives undertaken by the Church would include prolonged sessions building up empathic processes seasoned by moments of songs, dance and prayer. The painful recognition of the evil inflicted to others would be facilitated through the use of ancestral stories, accounts of traditions and past events, including the painful description and recognition of more recent evil inflicted on others. Only when they had already reached a certain degree of maturity would such church-led endeavours become the germ of more ambitious processes. The arduous task of "weeding" and preparing

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the ground for any grass-roots peace process would most times fall to the church; after some progress was made, other more powerful facilitators would take over from there while the initiators of such enterprises would often pass into oblivion. More often than not, the peace-building efforts spearheaded by the church were painstaking, lengthy and inconspicuous processes far from any public or media exposure. This might be one reason why they are not so much known, since the remembrance thereof often relies on the individuals or groups who witnessed them first-hand.

In some critical moments, it also happened that the contents and messages of such conferences would be so controversial that politicians and representatives of the SPLA/M would refuse to participate in them or to endorse them for fear of facing thorny topics or of losing some face in their constituencies or in the party. The church was very well aware about this, but this did not prevent her from spearheading new efforts.

Holy Trinity Peace Village Kuron

The work that most boldly incarnates Paride's vision of fraternity and peaceful coexistence is the Holy Trinity Peace Village in Kuron, in the state of Eastern Equatoria. The genesis of it goes back to bishop Paride's time in the Holy Land during his sabbatical periods. He was absolutely struck by the experience of visiting *Wahat Salam/Neve Shalom* ("Oasis of Peace"), an intercultural and interreligious community founded in 1970 in Israel. In this place, more than 70 families of Palestinian and Jewish background grow, work and coexist together in peace and respect for each other despite the surrounding violence and injustice caused by the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. After visiting this community, Bishop Paride felt the inspiration to start a similar undertaking in a region conspicuously marked by periods of violence, revenge for past evils and continuous insecurity (see Holy Trinity Peace Village Kuron, 2022).

In certain areas of Southern Sudan, pastoralist groups with similar cultural backgrounds, values and beliefs, including, among other beliefs, the mythical belief that the deity has granted *all* heads of cattle to that particular tribe, in detriment of other pastoralist groups. According to such principles, they are expected to show their bravery by fighting for the possession of cattle. Tribal leaders send their youth to the neighbours' territories in order to rustle more cattle. Unlike past times, where only spears were used in such incursions, now the availability of more lethal arms means that scores of casualties are caused whenever such groups fight for cattle.

In such an environment, Bishop Paride decided to create a "sacred ground" where respect for the other and for the human life would prevail, where violent means and the use of guns would officially be banned. The only permitted rivalry in such an environment would be the one disputed on a sport ground. Supported by a group of loyal idealists – including friends from peace-building organisations, religious sisters and some volunteers – he laid the corner stone of this work by building a bridge over the Kuron river, the only physical passage from one bank to the other in hundreds of kilometres and thus he built his paramount peace-building feat.

Thanks to a donation by the local governor, the Peace Village received a very wide strip of land meant for agricultural activities. After some time of awareness and training, small parts of that field were entrusted to local families ready to start growing a small garden with different kinds of crops that could provide them food and domestic income. The introduction of agriculture

was a deliberate attempt to reduce the dependency of the local population on cattle and husbandry.

Such activities ran parallel to specific peace-building exercises. The Peace Village had an encounter centre where representatives of warring tribes or even simple citizens would safely be able to meet and discuss issues related to their conflicts and differences. A dispensary – a place of healing – and a school – a place of peaceful tolerance – enhance the variety of social services available at the Peace Village. Paride's theory is that people who play and grow together will not engage later on in violent activities against each other. The competition for cattle takes place between human groups who otherwise never come in contact with each other and thus a social centre of any kind is for him a privileged opportunity to break the ice, tackle elemental issues and carry out day-to-day social cohesion for the sake of a more peaceful future.

After some years of development, the Holy Trinity Peace Village of Kuron is now a vibrant reality that has already transformed and improved the lives of thousands of people around that area. Many of them have already discovered the value of agriculture as means of life and, as a result, they have settled down in the vicinity of their fields instead of being itinerants running after the cattle. Some young people from the region, particularly girls, now have educational opportunities that had eluded them. A new Secondary School has been opened in the area and local youth from the Jie, Murle and Toposa communities are now able to prepare themselves for higher education, something unthinkable only some few years ago. Apart from providing services to the community, the place remains a sanctuary for those who want to opt for a peaceful way of dealing with each other. Though cattle rustling is still present in the region, the Peace Village is already presenting concrete alternatives and a forum to defuse tensions and mitigate the effects of such a practice.

Kuron is a peace-building vision made reality. By implementing it, Bishop Paride literally became a *pontiff*, a bridge-builder not only between unconnected river banks, but also between foes and adversaries.

A witness of the past, a reference for the future

Bishop Paride Taban is fond of saying that “On the seventh day, after God created the Sudan, he laughed”. According to him, even in the worst moments of its history and, despite so many negative factors, Sudan and the Sudanese were – even for God Almighty! – an unfailing source of happiness and hope. The modern history of this new country (Southern Sudan) presents a clear challenge to Bishop's Taban statement.

The 9th of July of 2011 marked for millions of people the start of a new era. After very long years of incommensurable suffering caused by discrimination, resentment and civil war, after signing a laborious peace agreement that put an end to the longest armed conflict in Africa, it looked that the voice of the Southern Sudanese finally be heard and people there would not only experience peace and security, but also they would be able to enjoy a new country on their own, with their own elected leaders, with functioning and fair institutions, and with the perspective of a new life in harmony, respect and social justice.

The great hopes and expectations of 2011 have now radically sobered up, and in many cases they are now completely dashed. Violence, human rights violations, displacement, and ethnic

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strife are again a common place in the country with the shameless complacency and the disgraceful passivity of a corrupt ruling elite. More than ten years after independence, there hasn't been any relevant change on the top leadership. The former-freedom-fighters-now-rulers have remained glued to their positions of power and show no intention of handing over their offices to younger, better prepared and more qualified candidates. To make matters worse, they keep following the warlord playbook: According to the UN, human rights abuses by South Sudan government amount to "war crimes" (United Nations (2018; Sooka, 2022) and this is a repeated accusation that also affects some other armed groups acting with total impunity in different areas of Southern Sudan.

Media outlets have been curbed and outspoken journalists are threatened or incarcerated if they expose any inconvenient truth that diverts from the official version of things. On top of that, there is little hope that upcoming elections might bring a better leadership. As a result of all these factors, millions of citizens have their livelihoods threatened by political games and they live in constant fear for their lives (see Amnesty International 2021; Amnesty International 2022).

South Sudan hardly has any leading figures able to stand up to corrupt leaders and call political and social leaders to account. Most dissidents or critical elements of the civil society have either been silenced or had to leave the country. Moral authority is presently the most needed commodity in the Southern Sudanese social fabric.

Mons. Paride Taban, even in his old age, is and remains a powerful beacon of hope and integrity in the background of moral decadence and political ambition that we experience in today's state of the nation. More than ever, it is necessary to make an exercise of historical remembrance and celebrate those individuals or groups that have paved the way to peace and reconciliation in the country.

More than ever before, youth in today's Southern Sudan need to have some role models to look up to who can show the way how a new society could be based on values of respect, tolerance, and love for each other. The history of Sudan and Southern Sudan is strikingly dramatic and violent but, on the other hand, it also has produced providential persons who, in the most complex and critical moments, managed to be up to the task of doing the right thing and taking the right decision, even if it caused to them some physical or emotional harm.

Figures like Mons. Taban show that differences and disagreements should not necessarily become a cause for hate, discrimination or violent confrontation of any kind. They show to future generations their moral calibre when they kept treating respectfully and even fraternally those people who hated them or wanted to have them eliminated. They simply were not ready to pay evil with a new evil, but rather, they tried to break the spiral of mistrust, hatred and violence. Such personalities are needed more than ever so that the utopia of a free, fair and peaceful Southern Sudan might be one day a tangible reality.

**This essay draws in part from the author's book, Peace deserves a chance: Bishop Paride Taban, a Sudanese shepherd. (Paulines Publications Africa, 2011). Mr. Eisman received an M. A. in Dogmatic Theology from the University of Innsbruck, Austria, and an M. A. in Development Studies from the University of the Basque Country. He has worked for 20 years in Africa in collaboration with the Catholic Church and with several other faith-based and secular organisations. Alongside his development activities, he has collaborated with different international media and he has also been the director of Radio Wa, a community radio owned by the Diocese of Lira in Northern Uganda.*

Endnotes

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- ⁱ Since Mons. Paride Taban's life was to a greater extent marked by the events related to the period prior to the independence of Southern Sudan, we often – unless indicated otherwise – will use the name of Sudan in a generic way, including the present republics of Sudan and Southern Sudan, which are two different entities from July 2011.
- ⁱⁱ The three “historical” regions of Southern Sudan were Equatoria, Bahr-el-Ghazal and Upper Nile.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Here I would like to mention two relevant books: Ashworth, J. (2014) *Voice of the voiceless: The role of the Church in the Sudanese Civil War*. Paulines Publications Africa. Diocese of Rumbek (2001) *The Church in Sudan Journeying Towards Justice and Peace*. Paulines Publications Africa.

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