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In Memory of Bishop Paride Taban

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In Memory of Bishop Paride Taban
24 May 1936 – 1 November 2023

The Journal of Social Encounters mourns the loss, and celebrates the life, of the much-loved Bishop Paride Taban. We thank our authors below for sharing their reflections on him. In his memory, we also re-print an essay about him by Alberto Eisman Torres, *A Beacon of Hope in a Troubled Context: Sketches of the Life of Mons. Paride Taban, Shepherd and Bridge-builder*, an essay in our special collection on Peace Bishops. I was blessed to know Bishop Taban, and would see him in Nairobi and in Minnesota. One of his associates was a student of mine at the Catholic University of Eastern Africa who wrote his Master’s thesis on the Kuron Peace Village. I always will remember Bishop Taban’s warm, smiling face, his compassion and his gentle and engaging manner. He knew more about peacebuilding than many of us academics and practitioners may ever know, and many of us wanted to learn more from him. He was a true reflection of Christ, and dare I say, a saint. May we continue to learn from him and be inspired by his example. – Ron Pagnucco

Reflections by: drs. Sara M.M.B. Ketelaar; Rev. Fr. Peter Mbaro; John Ashworth with Fr. Stan Ilo; Father Joseph G. Healey, MM; Rosanne Fischer; and William O’Keefe.

Bishop Paride Taban and Kuron Peace Village
Drs. Sara M.M.B. Ketelaar

Love, Joy, Peace, Patience, Compassion, Sympathy, Kindness, Truthfulness, Gentleness, Self-control, Humility, Poverty, Forgiveness, Mercy, Friendship, Trust, Unity, Purity, Faith and Hope, I Love you, I Miss you, I Thank you, I Forgive, we Forget, Together, I am Wrong, I am Sorry. Understanding, Discernment, Wisdom. Wise words of Bishop Paride Taban to make people co-exist.

Bishop Paride Taban passed away on All Saints Day 2023 at the age of 87. Bishop Taban worked tirelessly for peace, justice and freedom in what was then Sudan and later became South Sudan. He dedicated his life to serve others. In this country torn by civil wars, he has been invaluable to the hope for peace. Bishop Paride Taban was a teacher by example and
indefatigable reconciler in the tradition of leaders like Bishop Desmond Tutu, Mahatma Ghandi, Nelson Mandela, Malala Yousafzai.

Since the 1960s, Bishop Taban operated as a peacemaker at all levels. Under a shady tree where tribal chiefs were quarrelling about cattle, but also as a Bishop diplomat in the national and international arena. He would stop to greet and truly listen to what a three year old child in the village had to say as he also liaised with top leaders from places like Washington, the Vatican, Uganda, Kenya, Ethiopia. Bishop Taban was tirelessly committed to peace dialogue and a better life for citizens in South Sudan and the border areas of Kenya and Uganda. He was deeply involved in different peace agreements between armed groups and between the government of South Sudan and warring groups like David Yau Yau COBRA faction. Bishop was not afraid to sharply address warlords and political leaders about their unethical and violent behavior. Several times his great moral authority forced warlords to decide to lay down their arms and negotiate for peace.

Bishop Taban was a practical man and also shaped peace in a very practical way. He founded Holy Trinity Peace Village Kuron in the early 2000s, situated in the border province of Eastern Equatoria South Sudan to bring different ethnic communities who have been in conflict for many years to live and work peacefully together. In 1998 the area was inaccessible by road except between the months of January and March and the whole Greater Upper Nile region was cut off from Eastern Equatoria by the Kuron river. Bishop Paride Taban started to construct a bridge over the Kuron river to connect the two regions supported by the late Mathieu Haumann a Dutch Mill Hill missionary. 81 families from Toposa, Jie, Murle, Nyangatom and Kachipo decided to settle around the bridge to protect it, though the bridge also provided a new challenge as cattle raiders used it during the rainy season to extend and intensify cattle raiding. The settled community was the genesis of the peace that grew until it included people from over eight ethnic communities including a number of Kenyans and Ugandans mostly same language speakers as the Toposa.

Kuron peace village was created as a beacon of hope, love and peace in a troubled South Sudan, a symbolic model village to its leaders and citizens, many traumatized from decades of routinised violence and war. When local herdsmen in Kuron were carrying Kalashnikovs, Bishop Taban use to say it is to protect their cattle from outside enemies, the herdsmen control the gun brought in by foreigners, they now use it as a walking stick in a land where you are not protected. Bishop Taban would turn a burglar of his compound into the best guard of the peace village as the burglar knew the weak spots. Bishop Taban had the charisma and ability to transform human behavior with wisdom, deep spiritual reflection, practical action and pure love.

The initial approach of the peace village was to build bridges between former enemies to address broken relationships and build trust by meeting shared livelihood, education and health needs, beginning with an agricultural project among largely pastoralist communities that inhabited the land. This has since broadened to reflect the deeper needs linked to individual and collective integral human development and reconciliation.

It now includes programs of cultural activity and vocational training. For example inter-community theatre groups explore and raise awareness on social issues of early and opposed marriages, cattle raiding, child abduction, gender based violence, a training center offers skills in carpentry and writing. The peace team coordinates joint peace missions that monitor security between neighboring communities -including community policing in absence of functional
government structures in the region-, respond to incidences and risks and take collective action. Sports also has been used to build relationships between youth warriors who use to encounter one another in the cattle raiding battlefield.

Some people view Kuron peace village as a laboratory for South Sudan, though it cannot be easily replicated in other areas as it is rooted in leadership and context. Bishop Taban and the Peace Village were developing a Peace Academy in Kuron to enable other areas of South Sudan to learn from the approach. This needs future support especially now its founder passed on, in order to materialize his dream of making people in South Sudan to peacefully co-exist.

Bishop Paride Taban’s legacy continues to live on as he positively influenced the lives of countless people in South Sudan and beyond. He was a role model and mentor to generations of youth who continue to promote nonviolence and just peace under very difficult circumstances South Sudanese face today. Bishop Taban was in it for the long haul not for short-term results or quick fixes that often harm more than do good. Peace is a long-term transformative process with a largely traumatized society that suffered and still suffers from decades of civil war, exclusive power-sharing agreements and geopolitical wrangles. The Bishop often compared the newest country South Sudan with a baby who needs nurture, patience, love and care besides ever presence and strictness.

As a sign of appreciation for his lifelong efforts, Bishop Taban received several prestigious awards such as the Sergio Vieira de Mello Peace Prize by UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon in 2013, the Hubert Walter Award for Reconciliation and Interfaith Cooperation by the Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby in 2017 for co-founding the ecumenical New Sudan Council of Churches, the Four Freedoms Award in the Netherlands from the Roosevelt Foundation in 2018, the Opus prize (postuum) by Villanova University in the US in 2023.

Drs. Sara M.M.B. Ketelaar (saraketelaar2020@gmail.com) is an anthropologist-sociologist with twenty years of experience leading projects in the international peace movement PAX, the working organization of the Catholic peace movement Pax Christi and the Inter-church council in the Netherlands. From 2006-2011 she lived and worked in South Sudan and the borderlands of Kenya-Uganda where she set up a cross-border peace and sports program for youth warriors with Kuron peace village and Bishop Taban with whom she closely worked over two decades.

He has Joined the World of our Ancestors
Rev. Fr. Peter Mbaro

Bishop Emeritus Paride Taban: What a remarkable person, shepherd and a justice and peace gift, the Lord gave to the Church and Society! Indeed, this is the way to describe him. As we treasure him, as a peacebuilder, engaged in promotion of Integral Human Development (IHD), in all its aspects, we can assert that, he left an indelible mark in the life of the people of South Sudan, AMECEA Region, Africa and beyond. The late Bishop, went out of the ordinary and executed his apostolic duties in an extraordinary manner, impacting the lives of many by empowering them to be agents of the change they desired to see in their lives, especially in advocating for justice and social cohesion among peoples of all cultures. He spoke forthrightly about the ills of civil conflicts and their long term devastations on the livelihood of the citizens in the Sudan. He mobilized the public to embrace and internalize the tenets of Christian faith, contextualizing them in their social, cultural, economic and political situations they were living in. He passionately, followed his dream of seeing a united people, irrespective of their sociocultural diversities. No wonder his dreamed was realized when he came up with the
initiative of building of the Kuron Peace Village, where all felt they are brothers and sisters and at home. Having met him in person and experienced his openness to share his experience in humility and total submission to God’s will, I testify that he was and will remain forever in the mind of the citizens of the both cities (earthly and heavenly), an icon of humanity and epitome of true Christian life. He will ever be treasured as an embodiment of leadership founded on justice and peace for integral human development. In many African cultures such people, like Late Bishop Emeritus Paride Taban, don’t die, they only transit to the world of ancestors and continue to inspire life in the generations to come. Long live the legacy of the Great man of Africa and the whole world.

Rev. Fr. Peter Mbaro: Director- Center for Social Justice and Peace-The Catholic University of Eastern Africa

John Ashworth discusses the life and work of Bishop Paride Taban with Fr. Stan Ilo on African Catholic Voices, Pan African Pastoral and Theological Network.
https://www.buzzsprout.com/1861807/13944612

No Food for her Children.
Father Joseph G. Healey, MM.

When I heard of Paride Taban’s death I immediately thought of the powerful story he wrote called “No Food for Her Children” that we published in the Orbis Book Once Upon a Time in Africa: Stories of Wisdom and Joy. It came from Matthew Haumann’s book, The Long Road to Peace: Encounters with the People of Southern Sudan (Gracewing, 2000). It can be found online in our African Stories Database at: No Food for Her Children – African Proverbs, Sayings and Stories (tangaza.ac.ke) https://afriprov.tangaza.ac.ke/afri-story/no-food-for-her-children/

No Food for Her Children
by Bishop Paride Taban

The mother in Torit, Sudan has no food left for her children. The pots in her hut are empty, but only she knows it. The children just trust Mama. They are poor but don’t know it. She tells the children she has to cook, but that it will be troublesome if they are around when she unpacks the dried meat from the pot at the back, so the kids are sent outside. The meat pot is empty. She fills the cooking pot with stones and water and puts it on the fire. Then she calls the children back in and asks them to keep the fire going. Dried meat takes a long time to cook, and the children, thinking they are cooking meat, forget all about being hungry. The mother goes into the woods to find food, but, as many others have discovered, there is little remaining there. The basket on her head remains empty, and she is desperate.

Suddenly, from nearby she hears a lion roar. She is scared to death of lions, yet she draws closer to the sound and from behind a tree she watches a lion devouring a buffalo. Oh, she is afraid, but she also knows that the meat will keep her children alive. She takes the circlet of grass, with which she balances her basket, from her head and flings it at the lion to divert its attention. It works. When the lion pounces on the grass ring, the mother throws sand on the
buffalo meat, knowing that lions do not eat soiled flesh. When the lion returns, it recoils from its meal. The mother fills her basket with the soiled flesh, goes to wash it in the river and runs home.

The children are still minding the fire. She sends them out again and quickly cooks the fresh meat which does not take long. Her children and those of the neighbours have something to eat that day. Only the mother knows how close they had been to starvation.

**Father Joseph G. Healey, MM** is an American Maryknoll missionary priest who came to Kenya in 1968 and founded the Regional Catholic Bishops Association (AMECEA) Social Communications Office based in Nairobi, Kenya. He was a lecturer at Tangaza University College (CUEA) and at Hekima University College (CUEA) in Nairobi. Over many years he has taught courses on the “Small Christian Communities (SCCs) Model of Church.” He is a member of the AMECEA Small Christian Communities (SCCs) Training Team. He facilitates SCC Workshops and animates SCCs in Eastern Africa. He is an ordinary member of the St. Kizito Small Christian Community in the Waruku Section of St. Austin’s Parish in Nairobi Archdiocese and the St. Isidore of Seville Online Small Christian Community. During the Covid-19 pandemic he started full time in Internet Ministry and now focuses on promoting Online SCCs, the Synodal Process and digital evangelization. He is now based in New Vernon, New Jersey, USA. Email address: JoeHealey@ghealey.com

*Bishop Paride Taban: Drawing near in Love*

Rosanne Fischer

“Faith brings us closer. It makes us neighbors. It draws us closer to the lives of others” (Pope Francis).

Bishop Paride Taban, on one of his seven visits to the Diocese of St. Cloud, Minnesota, shared a story with diocesan staff: “One day there was great hunger in India. Mother Teresa was going around giving rice with some of the Sisters. They came upon an old man who was weak and dying. Mother Teresa, instead of giving rice, held the hand of the man. The man began crying, crying, crying. Mother Teresa said to him, “Why do you cry? I have more rice.” The man said, “I am not crying for rice. After many years, I have felt a warm hand.”

Like Mother Teresa, Bishop Paride was compassionately present with people in his native South Sudan and across the world. At the same time, he was tireless in his efforts toward a more dignified life for all. While in Minnesota, he would call back to East Africa in the middle of the night, tending to needs there, and still be up before sunrise to pray and exercise. I remember a night at the Peace Village in Kuron, South Sudan, when he left the compound in the middle of the night to assist travelers in the bush who had used up both spare tires. He still arrived fresh and smiling for the busy day that followed, beginning with 6am Mass. His commitment and stamina were awe-inspiring.

“I will raise up shepherds to look after them. They shall not fear any longer, or be dismayed, nor shall any be missing…” (Jeremiah 23:4).

Bishop Taban experienced siege and starvation, confinement and torture, death threats and drought along with his people. He refused to live in fear and was ALWAYS optimistic. He had no enemies. He said, “You can disarm a person by love, not by a gun, not by violence. Love is the best way of disarming a human being.” He advocated for tractors, plows, wells and schools.
He said, “we don’t need guns.” 2 His response to those who threatened him was to go to their house and take tea with them. He said, “We befriend an enemy by forgiveness, not by hate and revenge.” He quoted Martin Luther King, Jr, “One who is devoid of the power to forgive is devoid of the power of love,” adding that “forgiveness does not mean ignoring the acts done. It means, rather, that the evil no longer acts as a barrier to relationship. Forgiveness is a catalyst creating the atmosphere necessary for a fresh start and a new beginning.” 3

You simply could not be in the presence of Bishop Paride Taban without feeling hope and positivity, even in the face of grave situations. He was an inexhaustible source of energy and good cheer — always smiling and encouraging, always hopeful. I never heard him speak negatively about anyone. He lived the present fully, remembered the past kindly, and looked to the future with anticipation. He was a living example of faith, hope and love.

1 The Visitor, Kristi Anderson, August 12, 2016, p.3
2 St. Cloud Times, Stephanie Dickrell, August 6, 2016, p. 7A
3 Personal Witness from Bishop Paride Taban, Panel Event at the One World Centre, Germany, May 14-20, 2010, p.4

Rosanne Fischer is a past Director of the St. Cloud Mission Office in Minnesota and friend of Bishop Paride Taban.

Earning It: How Bishop Taban Saved My Life
William O'Keefe

A partner to my employer Catholic Relief Services, Bishop Paride Taban was a peacemaker and courageous pastor of his flock during the long war for South Sudanese independence. He saved many lives along the way, including mine.

On November 9, 1990, I flew in a small UN plane from Kenya to Torit in what was then rebel controlled southern Sudan. I went to support the work of CRS and our partners caring for the displaced and providing food and other support to those trapped by the war.

The next morning, I met Bishop Taban at the UN compound. At 8 a.m., he and I were talking in the morning sun when he looked up into the sky at a plane, thousands of feet up. He was listening intently to the sound of the engines. A critical survival skill there was to distinguish the sound of passenger planes flying to Nairobi from the Soviet bombers that the Sudanese Air Force used. At dawn every morning, Sudanese bombers took off from an airfield in El Obeid and made their way south to bomb rebel-controlled towns and villages. Bishop Taban realized that that morning, it was Torit’s turn.

Suddenly people started running and bombs started exploding nearby. Bishop Taban pushed me into a little shed and lay next to me. In my panic, all I could think was that my wife was going to kill me for leaving her a single mother with our then 7-month-old daughter. After a few seconds, he grabbed me and led me around the back of the next building. We dove into a makeshift bomb shelter, a hole covered with tree trunks and caked mud. We piled in with I don’t know how many other people. My heart was pounding. The ground shook as the bombs exploded. The shrapnel ripping through the leaves of the tree. I was terrified.

The Sudanese air force was not a precision operation. They rolled canister bombs out the back of these planes and they landed wherever they fell. The many rebel soldiers in the town escaped.
these bombings without harm. They had dug foxholes, built bomb shelters and knew what to do. Tragically, when the bombs started going off the children would run, the women would run after them, and they were the ones usually killed. Thirteen women and children died that day.

Once the bombing stopped, the bishop left to go to the hospital to tend to the wounded and to give solace to the families of the dead. He went to shepherd his flock. At 8 the next morning, I got on another UN flight to head back to Kenya.

I am eternally grateful for the life Bishop Taban’s saving act gave me. This was a singular experience for me, but one he had lived through many times. When he died, I told my adult children that they owed a great debt to a great man who had just passed away.

Bill O’Keefe is Executive Vice President of Catholic Relief Services (CRS) and a long-time observer and supporter of the people of South Sudan. In the early 1990’s, as a desk officer of CRS’ Africa Region, he traveled throughout the Horn of Africa including what is now South Sudan. Bill now heads up the policy, advocacy, government relations, and movement building division at CRS.

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