

# Mission to Sudan

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ONE DAY IN AFRICA a woman walked to visit her husband who was imprisoned for a crime he did not commit, and was later vindicated. As she entered his cell the man could see that she was several months pregnant and jumped to the conclusion that she had been unfaithful to him. He flew into a rage and began to violently beat the woman, kicking her in the stomach and trying to kill the baby. She curled up to protect the child and as the man tired, she was able to escape. Later, when the child was born, everyone in the family and village remarked how much he resembled his father in jail. He finally repented of his anger and violence and asked his wife for forgiveness. This event of misunderstanding, hostility, violence, and attempted murder in the early life of the boy was to characterize the ministry and later life of Paride Taban, the man who became the first bishop of the Diocese of Torit, in what is now known as the Republic of South Sudan.

For nearly twenty years Bishop Taban was in the epicenter of brutal war and civil insurrection, daily bombing runs, and famine. He lost a vehicle and was almost drowned in a flash flood, had numerous vehicles riddled with bullet holes as he sped through ambushes, frequently had murder contracts issued against him by both sides of the war, and was imprisoned in Torit after leading a relief convoy to bring food to the starving people. When other clergy fled the violence and killing, he stayed with his people. He gathered refugees

and worked tirelessly to feed them and teach them new methods of farming. He introduced oxen plowing to nomadic tribes and brought in grinding stones to grind meal to sustain them. He opened schools, built roads and clinics and picked up wounded from both sides of the conflict and took them for medical care.

He addressed sessions of Parliament in many European countries and spoke to both the House and Senate of the United States. He became an Ambassador for Peace, and the voice of a desperate and hopeless people who had no voice. His eloquent appeals and graphic accounts of the violence perpetrated on the people of South Sudan were a great help in bringing international pressure on the government of Khartoum, which led to the talks that eventually brought peace and independence to South Sudan.

In 2000, after a providential meeting with Bishop Taban, Renewal Ministries began a yearly collaboration that has borne much fruit, particularly in working with the priests there. In February of 2012 we joined the Bishop in the new Republic of South Sudan for evangelization training and a celebration of his 75<sup>th</sup> birthday at the Holy Trinity Peace Village in Kuron. Not an easy place to reach, we flew from the US to Nairobi and spent the night at the diocesan pastoral center. The next day we caught a charter flight to the UN camp of Lokichoggio and from there boarded another small plane for Kuron. The Bishop met us at the small dirt airstrip and took us on a short tour of his new clinic, which is run by a religious sister who is a nurse; it is the only clinic for hundreds of miles around. From there we continued on to the Peace Village.

Each morning we walked about three quarters of a mile to begin our training sessions at the youth camp. We crossed a dry riverbed where a colorful group of Taposa women and their beautiful children were digging a deep hole to collect drinking water. This type of drinking water often contains the eggs of the parasitic Guinea worm and causes much sickness and death. Everyone wanted to greet us along the way with “mata” and shake our hands. We had to dodge occasional herds of cows and donkeys vying for the water as well.

Our classes were attended by ten representatives from all three deaneries of the Diocese of Torit: twenty Taposa women who are Bishop



About 150 students from the school in Bishop Taban's Peace Village and representatives from the diocese of Torit attended the daily sessions where they were hungry to learn more about their Catholic faith.

By Lloyd Greenhaw

Taban's staunch supporters with the local tribe, around 150 students from the school the Bishop has started (there are normally 250 students but 100 were sent home due to the lack of food), and most of the teachers and workers from the Peace Village. The school only goes through 8<sup>th</sup> grade, but many of the students are in their 20's. It was the first opportunity for all these youth to receive an education and they were really eager to learn all about the Catholic faith. They listened closely as we taught about the danger of tribal violence, raiding, and war. We really stressed the new beginning the Lord was giving them with the coming of peace and independence, and that if Christ was put in the center of their lives, the new Republic of South Sudan could be whatever they decided to make it.

Over the next several days we taught on the fundamentals of the kerygma, getting and staying free, Baptism in the Holy Spirit, and Catholic apologetics. After all the teaching sessions we allowed questions and answers and did some type of ministry. At one ministry session we led everyone in an adult decision to make Jesus their Lord and Savior and invited the Lord to come and heal. At another we led them in a time of forgiveness, focusing on the hurts of the war and tribal conflicts. Another time we had them renounce patterns of sin and blocks to moving closer to the Lord. Everyone really entered into the renunciation with gusto!

The Bishop and six priests attended the sessions and at the end of the morning sessions they celebrated Mass for us all. The Bishop asked me to use the time at all the homilies to share reflections on our Catholic faith. At one Mass, as I was teaching on the Eucharist from John 6, I read from verse 67 where Jesus turned to the disciples and asked, "Do you want to leave me too?" To illustrate the point, I walked over to one of the priests, tapped him on the shoulder and asked that same question, "Do you want to leave me too?" I then looked him in the eye and quoted Peter who said, "Lord to whom shall we go? You alone have the words of eternal life." Later, this priest privately told me that he was considering leaving the priesthood and when I quoted Peter it was as if God had spoken directly to him!



One of the more memorable Ash Wednesdays was attending Mass in the Republic of South Sudan. Bishop Taban, a hero of the faith, is seen here distributing ashes to Taposa tribesmen.

Each day after Mass we made the trek back to the Peace Village for lunch and to rest for a few hours and then back for afternoon sessions. Surprisingly, almost everyone hung in for these sessions despite the oppressive heat. A number of the priests who attended had been with us in years past and it was so gratifying to hear how our teaching on freedom and praying for them had helped them so much.

Our time at the Peace Village culminated with a large outdoor Mass with over 1000 people in attendance. There were delegations from Norway, Sweden, Belgium, and the Ambassador from the Netherlands. There was a special representative from the new president of the Republic of the South Sudan and all three governors from East, West, and Central Equatorial Sudan. There were quite a few members of parliament and numerous tribal chiefs. Despite the seemingly endless speeches and protocol it was an interesting and informative day and Bishop Taban introduced us as the "spiritual arm" of the Kuron Peace Village.

The new Republic of South Sudan is still a very troubled region. The borders between the north and south are not clearly drawn and are the scene of almost daily conflicts. Bishop Taban has repeatedly been called in by the government to mediate tribal conflicts. We were told by one of the governors that the north is once again bombing villages and schools in the Nuba Mountains. Again, Christ is the only answer. Systems and governments don't change. People change, but only after an encounter with the living God. We pray and trust that our time in Sudan facilitated this encounter. +

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