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ACTIVE NONVIOLENCE: A WAY TO BUILD LASTING PEACE IN SOUTH SUDAN

A message of Nonviolence from Consecrated Life to our Religious communities, the Churches and the People of South Sudan, to our Friends and Supporters and all People of Good Will

We, members of the Religious Superiors' Association of South Sudan (RSASS), who came together for a workshop on Consecrated Life and the RSASS Annual General Assembly 2017 at the Good Shepherd Peace Centre, in Kit (Juba), from 24th - 29th April 2017, have reflected on active nonviolence and on Pope Francis' letter '*Nonviolence: a Style of Politics for Peace*' in the hope to contribute with a positive response to the challenges of South Sudan today. Faithful to our call by God and to the Charism of our Congregations, we wish to send out this message of nonviolence at the conclusion of our meeting to our brothers and sisters in our Religious communities, to the Churches and the people of South Sudan, to our friends and supporters and all people of good will.

LOOKING AT SOUTH SUDAN TODAY

"It is impossible for us not to speak about what we have seen and heard".
(Acts of the Apostles 4:20)

We have heard from our brothers and sisters some shocking and disturbing news. The country is immersed in violence and in a deep economic crisis. There have been so many killings, raping, burning of houses and looting. Innocent people, including children, have been brutally killed. The rights and dignity of people have been grossly violated. Hundreds of thousands are internally displaced or refugees. Famine is a sad reality and the economic crisis increases hunger. Hatred, bitterness and divisions have also increased. People feel traumatised and helpless. We are concerned that often church personnel have been harassed, intimidated, detained, and some have been killed. This civil war that keeps on revolving is evil and has claimed the lives of too many brothers and sisters and inflicted endless suffering on our people. What have we done to our humanness and the sacredness of life?

Despite all this, we have seen signs of life and hope. There are many good people in South Sudan who, together with many others, are giving a positive response and making a difference in this challenging situation. We have also heard from our brothers and sisters about the insistence, persistence and resilience of the people of South Sudan, that the Church is continuously praying and fasting for peace and reconciliation, has issued messages and

pastoral letters to denounce violence and encourage people, got actively involved in the peace talks and is providing shelter, food, education and health care for many people. We have heard also that Church personnel have become a presence of solidarity, peace and hope among communities in war-affected areas, protection of civilians sites (POCs) and refugee camps, that South Sudan Council of Churches (SSCC) has invited his Holiness Pope Francis to visit South Sudan this year. We have testified that the Religious Superiors' Association of South Sudan (RSASS) has opened the 'Good Shepherd Peace Centre' in Kit to offer trauma healing and peacebuilding programmes and other human and spiritual formation and is fully operating in a peaceful environment.

We cannot forget our dear Sister Veronika Rackova of the Congregation of the Missionary Sisters Servants of the Holy Spirit (SSpS). She was one of our members and a doctor who was gunned down by soldiers while driving an ambulance on the night of 16th May 2016 in Yei. Her mission was to save lives and her 'sacrifice' an action of active nonviolence. She did not die in vain. We offer our solidarity to her community and Congregation and at the same time we demand that justice may be done.

JESUS AND ACTIVE NONVIOLENCE

"For Christ is our peace, he who has made the two peoples one, destroying in his own flesh the wall – the hatred – which separated us (...) He destroyed hatred and reconciled us both to God through the cross".
(Ephesians 2:14-16)

We have looked at the Word of God and at the Teaching of the Church. Both shed light and hope on South Sudan. We have seen that nonviolence is at the heart of the Gospel and that Jesus of Nazareth himself lived in violent times, but his message offers a radically positive approach. Jesus Christ has come into the world to save it from sin and death, to fight against violence and to destroy it with the nonviolence of his Kingdom. On the way of the cross, his painful journey to Calvary, Jesus Christ, a nonviolent person, carried on himself the violence of the enemy for the sake of many. He died on the cross because of the kind of life he lived, a life of nonviolence and inclusive compassion. He died because of the options he made.

Jesus challenged the unjust and violent legal system and the political and religious establishments of his time, the institutions and structures that produced social exclusion and inflicted much suffering on people. He challenged violence and those who profited from it. He was willing to risk suffering. The only weapon Jesus used was love and compassion. He resisted with all his might the temptation to be drawn into violence and retaliation. We have understood in our reflections and prayers that Jesus Christ is not calling to passivity, but rather to a creative nonviolent response and calls us to cultivate a virtue of nonviolent peacemaking. Indeed, Jesus Christ is our Redeemer and Lord, and our model of peacemaker.

His Holiness Pope Francis has issued a message on 1st January 2017 for the celebration of the fiftieth World Day of Peace under the title *'Nonviolence: a Style of Politics for Peace'*. We have been encouraged by his message. Pope Francis reminds us that "to be true followers of Jesus today also includes embracing his teaching about nonviolence, (...) as a person's way of being, the attitude of one who is so convinced of God's love and power that he or she is not afraid to

tackle evil with the weapons of love and truth alone” (Pope Francis’ message for the fiftieth World Day of Peace, 1 January 2017).

We became aware that the Church has been involved in nonviolent peacebuilding strategies in many countries and Pope Francis teaches us that “to act in this way means to choose solidarity as a way of making history and building friendship in society. Active nonviolence is a way of showing that unity is truly more powerful and more fruitful than conflict” (Pope Francis’ message for the fiftieth World Day of Peace, 1 January 2017). We have understood, however, that nonviolence entails self-sacrifice and are convinced that active nonviolence is a good way to build a just and lasting peace in South Sudan. So, we reaffirm our commitment to make all effort to build peace through active and creative nonviolence.

PROMOTING ACTIVE NONVIOLENCE

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, the merciful and the peacemakers, those who are pure in heart, and those who hunger and thirst for justice”.
(Matthew 5:3-10)

The Gospel and Pope Francis invite us to “dedicate ourselves prayerfully and actively to banishing violence from our hearts, words and deeds, and to becoming nonviolent people and to building nonviolent communities that care for our common home” (Pope Francis’ message for the fiftieth World Day of Peace, 1 January 2017).

IN RESPONSE,

- We offer our prayers and solidarity to the victims of violence in South Sudan.
- We want to take a clear stand for creative and active nonviolence and against all forms of violence and threats to life and human dignity.
- We have made an Action Plan to raise active nonviolence awareness through civic education, media/radio, workshops for mixed groups, games and sports, women groups/desks and the strengthening of family unity.
- We are committed to promote active nonviolence through the celebrations of the Eucharist, unity in diversity and other prayers.
- We encourage our Religious brothers and sisters in our communities to make all effort to build peace through active and creative nonviolence.
- We invite our religious leaders to lift up the vision of nonviolence in their preaching and teaching ministry.
- We urge our political leaders to end the war in South Sudan, to respect human rights and to promote a culture of peace and active nonviolence.
- We continue our prayers that justice, reconciliation and lasting peace may prevail in South Sudan.

Given in Kit (Juba), South Sudan, on 28th April 2017

The participants of the workshop on Consecrated Life and the RSASS Annual General Assembly 2017

Religious Superiors’ Association of South Sudan (RSASS)