

# PEACE INITIATIVES THROUGH EDUCATION AND SOLIDARITY IN CONFLICT

By Orla Treacy, IBVM\*

Good afternoon – Cardinal, Fathers, Sisters, Brothers and Friends. I am very happy to be with you this afternoon and share a little of my life in South Sudan.

When I was making my Final Profession some years ago I was invited to choose a motto for my ring – I chose an expression which had been used by our foundress Mary Ward – “love and speak the truth” it has its roots in St Paul to the Ephesians 4:15. I was full of idealism – I made my Profession three months before I moved to South Sudan. I believed in fighting injustice and in standing up for the truth. I believed in living peacefully and helping those who are victims.

I can definitely say that South Sudan has challenged every fibre of my being and my motto, but challenging unjust systems has become a clearer reality for me. We live in a time of war, a time of hunger and a time when one might wonder about human rights. There is much injustice, but for me working with young people and girls in particular the greatest injustice we face each day is that of forced marriage.

And I want to share a little with you on this theme this afternoon.

## **Rebecca Alek**

Rebecca Alek was a student with us and a candidate for the government exams, she was four months away from graduating when her father visited, he never visited, but he wanted to take her home for a family meeting – Rebecca was happy to go and she left – but sadly she never returned to school.

We heard in the days after that she was given a choice of three men, she had chosen the one she loved but the extended family wasn't happy with her choice and she was being forced to marry another.

When news of this reached us I met with her class and told them what had happened – they were clearly upset and full of fire – they really challenged me – what was I going to do about it? I asked what could be done. One student told me if I didn't do anything about it we might as well close down the school – if one parents gets away with it others will do the same.

It was clear we had to act before the deed was sealed – armed with a few just minded companions we drove three hours to the house – when we reached we were told she had already been brought to the husband's house - so we set out again – when we reached the man's house we were met by a very hostile crowd, some with guns – they worried about our agenda – finally we were given permission to visit Rebecca – she was in a hut, armed guards at the door and women were all around. They feared that she might run away or that the other man might come to take her!

It was a shocking scene for me – I had heard of forced and arranged marriages but I have never experienced in up close – Rebecca herself was hysterical, she talked of suicide – she told us how she had been tied up, beaten and brought to the man's house.

We could do little except reassure her that we were with her. We talked with the man's family and pleaded that they allow her to return to school to at least finish her exams – they were polite.

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We went back to school very differently but still hopeful that Rebecca could at least come back and finish her studies – the days and weeks passed and Rebecca never came back. We called, visited and phoned the husband but Rebecca never came back to finish her exams.

### **Jennifer**

And then there was the story of Jennifer- our former Head Girl she stayed on to work with us in the office as the secretary. She is a brilliant student with a great future in English, perhaps as a teacher or a journalist – Jennifer contacted me over that Christmas, five months before she was due to go to University – the father had accepted cows for her wedding and she was to marry. She was very upset as it meant an end to her dreams for study.

We were able to contact the university and they accepted her in January, just three weeks later. Jennifer's father surprisingly did accept for Jennifer to go to University. It was wonderful, we were so delighted. Jennifer was 20 years of age – really challenging the traditional practices.

Two weeks after Jennifer started her university course she was informed that her 15 year old sister was given to the same man in marriage – Remember Jennifer's father had accepted the cows which meant someone had to marry the man!

### **Reflection**

Rebecca's marriage was my first taste of forced marriage and it's a bitter taste that lingers for me.

I thought I would simply go there, talk to the family and get her out – it never happened.

But we didn't let Rebecca's case go – we decided that we needed to protect every girl and so now every student that comes to the secondary school must have a consent form signed by the family. This is an agreement that families will not force their daughter out of school due to forced marriage.

It doesn't protect everyone and each year we still have problems with families – we have been threatened through phone calls, verbal abuse and even at gun point.....sometimes we have won but often we have lost these cases.

And then Jennifer's case – where was the justice in it? We thought we were great fighting for Jennifer but when her 15 year old sister was given in marriage, who did we really help, did we really help? I told myself we did our best, Jennifer's sister is not our student.....

Each year in our school we lose about 2% of our girls through forced marriage – it's not too bad when you look at the national average for marriage- 52% of 18 year old girls are married while 17% are married under 15.

This is a cultural practice, it involves the extended family and girls in our area are married for a cow dowry- anywhere between 20 and 300 cows.

### **Country**

When I came to South Sudan in 2006 it was country full of hope – the peace agreement had just been signed and there was possibilities of a better life. 2011 was special – independence brought a pride and joy to all. Sadly it didn't last long.

In our poverty and our hunger we cling to tradition and cultural practices. We have more guns, more violence, more crimes against women and people are hungry. Neighbours are fighting one another all over the country – you may ask where do the guns come from? Who is funding it? What do they want? I don't know Salva Kiir, or Paul Malong, or Riak Machar. I don't know the inner politics of the situation.

But I know the reality of our girls and our fight is for them – for the hope of a better future – for the dream of educated women who can slowly help to change their own culture.

Forced marriage has become the fight for us.

### **Limitations:**

What we do is never enough.

Our late Bishop used to say “keep focused on the work you are here to do, the needs are great and you can’t do everything”. This has helped me in my journey and work.

When I started out on this road I had romantic ideas as to how I was going to help bring about change – how I was going to stand tall in the face of abuse and injustice, how I was going to speak the truth. I confess one of the greatest challenges I have personally faced is in dealing with my own limitations. There have been times when in challenging the system I have had to learn to run fast and hide. I don’t challenge our politicians, I don’t challenge the local gunmen. I have stuck with one cause and try to do what I can for the girls.

The words of my ring “Love and speak the truth” – are a daily challenge to me. I have learnt that to speak the truth I must first love and then find the truth – my truth is not always God’s truth and truth is not always success, but love is constant.

Others, companions on the road, my community members and the students challenge me to love deeper and to listen more attentively. I am challenged to accept failure when it comes and to acknowledge my limitations.

Pray has become my anchor – though I confess prayers of Passion and Suffering seem more real and apt than the Easter stories of Resurrection. Finding God in all is not something sophisticated but we see it in the simple, ordinary moments.

### **Conclusion - Deborah**

I talked about the girls in our Secondary School but we also have a local Primary School a day school for boys and girls. On Christmas Even I woke to the sound of screams and cries from our neighbours house, it was 2.30am – there had been fighting in our area the previous week and we were concerned that the fighting had returned. In the morning we heard that one of our Primary girls had been forced from her bed and married – we were too late, there was nothing we could do – Deborah is a 13 year old girl, top student in the class.

In the current crisis in South Sudan younger girls are becoming more vulnerable, more and more families are struggling to survive to have enough food and medicines. Marrying off a young daughter is a source of income to a family and in a crisis people do what they need to do to survive.

But we don’t give up hope – there is still work to be done – we have other Deborah’s to protect. We cling to the hope of better days, of loving and speaking the truth, of trusting in the Lord and for us of fighting for one girl at a time, one step at a time.

### **Concrete action**

Even though I spoke about the situation in South Sudan, I ask you to consider your own culture and the injustices you experience and know about. What injustices can you try and take a step to challenge? What people or person can you reach out to and help?

Let’s put our hands together to make a change –**one step at a time and one person at a time.**