134. A Ship in the Harbour

On June 26th, the following was reported in the Sudan Tribune:

‘South Sudan has been named the world’s “most fragile” state, ending Somalia’s six-years atop the Fragile State Index, a new report says. The report, issued by the United States-based Fund for Peace (FFP), blames chronic instability, fractured leadership and growing ethnic conflict for South Sudan’s poor ranking. The country’s independence, while initially giving cause for celebration, is now giving only cause for concern as its politics and leadership grows increasingly fractious, and mass killings – especially targeting specific ethnic groups – gains momentum,” partly reads the report. The top six countries on the index are all in sub-Saharan Africa, with Afghanistan listed seventh most fragile state followed by Yemen, Haiti and Pakistan. Annually produced by FFP, the report mainly highlights global political, economic and social pressures experienced by states and is widely considered a critical tool in highlighting not only the normal pressures that all states experience, but also in identifying when those pressures are pushing a state towards the brink of failure.’

Reading such a report could understandably generate a reaction such as:

‘There is no way I am going anywhere near there.’

Yet, Solidarity with South Sudan has 32 religious sisters, brothers and priests, and a couple of lay people, from various countries living and working in South Sudan. So why are they there? While on home leave, I saw a television commercial which, in my mind, points to the reason. The commercial ended with a person making the enigmatic statement:

‘A ship in the harbour is safe but that’s not what ships are for.’

A person in his or her home place can feel very safe, especially if the home country appears nowhere on any list of most fragile states! When that film full of beautiful scenery and haunting music, ‘The Mission’, first appeared, I wondered at the tremendous courage of the early missionaries risking their lives on a mission in which they believed. The left the safety of their home harbours and headed off on uncharted voyages into the unknown, across rough seas into unmapped lands. They took real risks to do what they felt called to do.

A pope in the Vatican is safe. A pope in a bulletproof car is also relatively safe. A pope who utters platitudes that do not upset too many people is safe from criticism. But the pope who walks among the people, or drives in an open car, who reaches out with heartfelt sympathy to all people no matter what their problems, who brings new hope to the poor and distressed people of the world in unconventional ways, who presents as a simple man of peace rather than as a person of pomp, power and prestige, is doing what a pope is for.

So why is there a Solidarity with South Sudan, a joint initiative of over 200 religious congregations? By working together, we are doing what we are for. It is good that in developed societies Catholic schools and hospitals can now be run well by lay Catholics and by secular people of all persuasions; but it is not yet that way in fragile states such as South Sudan. So religious men and women who have committed to give their lives to help others, live out that commitment by leaving the safety of the harbour. When the early Comboni missionaries went to Africa, they knew that most of the earlier African missionaries had died from malaria and other diseases. It was more dangerous then. But they went and they were very successful in establishing the Church in South Sudan. The Combonis today continue their own ministries in South Sudan but are also part of Solidarity with South Sudan. There is great strength in working together as the religious congregations are doing in South Sudan. We are there together because that is what we are for. - Br Bill