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Spiritual retreat for the civil and ecclesiastical authorities of South Sudan

The spiritual retreat attended by the civil and ecclesiastical authorities of South Sudan, in the *Domus Sanctae Marthae* in the Vatican, came to an end at 17.00 this afternoon. The retreat, which began yesterday, was organized by joint agreement between the Vatican Secretariat of State and the Office of the Archbishop of Canterbury, His Grace Justin Welby.

After his address, the Holy Father kissed the feet of the president and vice president designated by South Sudan, an extraordinary sign to invoke commitment to peace on the part of the South Sudanese leaders.

The participants then received a Bible signed by the Holy Father Francis, His Grace Justin Welby, and the Rev. John Chalmers, former Moderator of the Presbyterian Church of Scotland, with the phrase: "Find what unites, overcome what divides". The leaders of South Sudan, who made a joint commitment to peace, were also blessed.

The following is the address given by the Holy Father at the end of the retreat:

Address of the Holy Father

Initial Greeting

1. I extend a cordial welcome to each of you here present: the President of the Republic and the Vice-Presidents of the future Presidency of the Republic, who in accordance with the terms of the *Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of Conflict in South Sudan* will assume their high national responsibilities on 12 May next. I also offer fraternal greetings to the members of the South Sudan Council of Churches, who spiritually accompany the flock entrusted to them in their respective communities; I thank all of you for the good will and open heart with which you accepted my invitation to take part in this retreat in the Vatican. I would likewise offer a special greeting to the Archbishop of Canterbury, His Grace Justin Welby, who conceived this initiative – he is a brother who is always moving forwards on the path of reconciliation – and to the former Moderator of the General Assembly of

the Church of Scotland, the Very Reverend John Chalmers. I join all of you in giving heartfelt thanks and praise to God for enabling us to share these two days of grace in his holy presence, in order to implore and receive his peace.

“Peace be with you!” (*Jn 20:19*). I address you with the same encouraging and comforting words with which the risen Lord greeted his fearful and disconsolate disciples when he appeared to them in the Upper Room following his resurrection. It is extremely important for us to realize that “peace” was the very first word that the Lord spoke. Peace was his first gift to the Apostles after his sorrowful passion and his triumph over death. I offer that same greeting to you, who come from a situation of great suffering, for yourselves and your people, a people sorely tried by the consequences of conflicts. May it echo in the “upper room” of this house, like the words of the Master, and enable each of you to draw new strength to work for the desired progress of your young nation. Like the fire of Pentecost that descended on the young Christian community, may it kindle a new light of hope for all the people of South Sudan. Holding all these intentions in my heart, I renew my greeting: “Peace be with you!”

Peace is the first gift that the Lord brought us, and the first commitment that leaders of nations must pursue. Peace is the fundamental condition for ensuring the rights of each individual and the integral development of an entire people. Jesus Christ, whom God the Father sent into the world as the Prince of Peace, gave us the model to follow. Through his own sacrifice and obedience, he bestowed his peace on the world. That is why, from the moment of his birth, the choir of angels sang the heavenly hymn: “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased” (*Lk 2:14*). What joy it would bring, were all the South Sudanese people to raise with one voice the song that echoes that of the angels: “O God, we praise and glorify you for your grace on South Sudan, land of great abundance; uphold us in peace and harmony” (*first verse of the South Sudan national anthem*). How I wish that the voices of the entire human family could join that heavenly choir in singing glory to God and working for peace among all men and women!

The gaze of God

2. We are all aware that this meeting is something altogether special and in some sense unique, since it is neither an ordinary bilateral or diplomatic meeting between the Pope and Heads of State, nor an ecumenical initiative involving representatives of different Christian communities. Instead, it is a spiritual retreat. The word “retreat” itself indicates a desire to step back from our usual environment or activities and to retire to a secluded place. The adjective “spiritual” suggests that this new space and experience should be marked by interior recollection, trusting prayer, deep reflection and encounters of reconciliation, so as to bear good fruits for ourselves and, as a consequence, for the communities to which we belong.

The purpose of this retreat is for us to stand together before God and to discern his will. It is to reflect on our own lives and the common mission the Lord has entrusted to us, to recognize our enormous shared responsibility for the present and future of the people of South Sudan, and to commit ourselves, reinvigorated and reconciled, to the building up of your nation. Dear brothers and sisters, let us not forget that God has entrusted to us, as political and religious leaders, the task of being guides for his people. He has entrusted much to us, and for this reason will require from us much more! He will demand an account of our service and our administration, our efforts on behalf of peace and the well-being of the members of our communities, especially the marginalized and those most in need. In other words, he will ask us to render an account not only of our own lives, but the lives of others as well (cf. *Lk 12:48*).

The cry of the poor who hunger and thirst for justice binds us in conscience and commits us in our ministry. They are the least in the eyes of the world, yet precious in God’s eyes. In using the expression “God’s eyes”, I think of the gaze of the Lord Jesus. Every spiritual retreat, like our daily examination of conscience, should make us feel that, with our whole being, our entire history, all our virtues and even our vices, we stand before the gaze of the Lord, who is able to see the truth in us and to lead us fully to that truth. The Word of God gives us a striking example of how the encounter with the gaze of Jesus can mark the most important moments in the life of a disciple. I am speaking of *the three times that the Lord gazed upon the Apostle Peter*, which I would now like to recall.

The first time that Jesus gazed upon Peter was when his brother Andrew brought him to Jesus and pointed him out as the Messiah. Jesus then fixed his gaze on Simon and said to him that henceforth he would be called Peter (cf. *Jn* 1:41-42). Later, the Lord would tell him that on this “rock” he would build his Church, indicating that he was counting on Peter to carry out his plan of salvation for his people. Jesus’ first gaze, then, was a gaze of “election”, choosing, which awakened enthusiasm for a special mission.

The second time Jesus gazed on Peter was late at night on Holy Thursday. Peter had denied the Lord a third time. Jesus, forcibly led away by the guards, fixed his gaze on him again, which awakened in him this time a painful but salutary repentance. The Apostle went out and “wept bitterly” (*Mt* 26:75) at having betrayed the Master’s call, his trust and his friendship. Jesus’ second gaze, then, touched Peter’s heart and brought about his conversion.

Finally, after the resurrection, on the shore of the Sea of Tiberias, Jesus once more fixed his gaze on Peter and asked him three times to declare his love. He then entrusted him once again with the mission of shepherding his flock, and indicated that this mission was to culminate in the sacrifice of his life (cf. *Jn* 21:15-19).

In a real way, all of us can say that we were called to the life of faith and were chosen by God, but also by our people, to serve them faithfully. In this service, we may well have made mistakes, some rather small, others much greater. Yet the Lord Jesus always forgives the errors of those who repent. He always renews his trust, while demanding – of us especially – total dedication to the cause of his people.

Dear brothers and sisters, Jesus’ gaze rests, here and now, on each of us. It is very important to meet this gaze with our inner eye and to ask ourselves: How is Jesus gazing on me today? To what is he calling me? What does the Lord want me to forgive and what in my attitudes does he want me to change? What is my mission and the task that God entrusts to me for the good of his people? That people belongs to him, not to us; indeed, we ourselves are members of the people. It is simply that we have a responsibility and a particular mission: that of serving them.

Dear brothers and sisters, Jesus is also gazing, here and now, upon each one of us. He looks at us with love, he asks something, he forgives something and he gives us a mission. He has put great trust in us by choosing us to be his co-workers in the creation of a more just world. We can be sure that his gaze penetrates the depths of our hearts; it loves, transforms, reconciles and unites us. His kind and merciful gaze encourages us to renounce the paths that lead to sin and death, and it sustains us as we pursue the paths of peace and goodness. Here is an exercise that is beneficial, one that we can always do, even at home: consider that Jesus is gazing on me, on us and that it will be this same gaze, full of love, which will greet us on the last day of our earthly life.

The gaze of the people

3. God’s gaze is especially directed to you; it is a look that offers you peace. Yet there is another gaze directed to you: is the gaze of our people, and it expresses their ardent desire for justice, reconciliation and peace. At this moment, I want to assure all your fellow citizens of my spiritual closeness, especially the refugees and the sick, who have remained in the country with great expectations and with bated breath, awaiting the outcome of this historic day. I am certain that they are accompanying this meeting with great hope and fervent prayer. Noah waited for the dove to bring him an olive branch to show the end of the flood and the beginning of a new era of peace between God and man (cf. *Gen* 8:11). In the same way, your people is awaiting your return to your country, the reconciliation of all its members, and a new era of peace and prosperity for all.

My thoughts turn first to all those who have lost their loved ones and their homes, to families that were separated and never reunited, to all the children and the elderly, and the women and men who have suffered terribly on account of the conflicts and violence that have spawned so much death, hunger, hurt and tears. We have clearly heard the cry of the poor and the needy; it rises up to heaven, to the very heart of God our Father, who desires to grant them justice and peace. I think often of these suffering souls and I pray that the fires of war will finally die down, so that they can return to their homes and live in serenity. I pray to Almighty God that peace

will come to your land, and I ask all men and women of good will to work for peace among your people.

Dear brothers and sisters, peace is possible. I shall never tire of repeating this: peace is possible! Yet this great gift of God is at the same time a supreme duty on the part of those with responsibility for the people. We Christians believe and know that peace is possible, for Christ is risen. He has overcome evil with good. He has assured his disciples of the victory of peace over everything that fans the flames of war: pride, greed, the lust for power, self-interest, lies and hypocrisy (cf. *Homily at the Prayer for Peace in South Sudan and in the Democratic Republic of the Congo*, 23 November 2017).

It is my prayerful hope that all of us will take up our lofty calling to be peacemakers, striving in a spirit of fraternity and solidarity with every member of our people, a spirit that is noble, upright, strong and courageous, to build peace through dialogue, negotiation and forgiveness. I urge you, then, to seek what unites you, beginning with the fact that you belong to one and the same people, and to overcome all that divides you. People are wearied, exhausted by past conflicts: please remember that with war, all is lost! Your people today are yearning for a better future, which can only come about through reconciliation and peace.

With great hope and trust, I learned last September that the highest political representatives of South Sudan had signed a peace agreement. Today, therefore, I congratulate the signatories of that document, both present and absent, without exception, beginning with the President of the Republic and the heads of political parties, for having chosen the path of dialogue, for your readiness to compromise, your determination to achieve peace, your readiness to be reconciled and your will to implement what has been agreed upon. I express my heartfelt hope that hostilities will finally cease, that the armistice will be respected – please, that the armistice be respected – that political and ethnic divisions will be surmounted, and that there will be a lasting peace for the common good of all those citizens who dream of beginning to build the nation.

The common efforts of our fellow Christians and the various ecumenical initiatives of the South Sudan Council of Churches on behalf of reconciliation and peace, and care for the poor and the marginalized, have made a significant contribution to the progress of the entire South Sudanese people. I recall with joy and gratitude my recent meeting in the Vatican with the Bishops' Conference of Sudan and South Sudan during their Visit *ad limina Apostolorum*. I was struck by their optimism grounded in a living faith and shown in tireless outreach, but also by their concern about the many political and social difficulties. Upon all the Christians of South Sudan who, in helping those in greatest need, bind up the wounds of Jesus' body, I implore God's abundant graces and assure them of a constant remembrance in my prayers. May they be peacemakers in the midst of the South Sudanese people, by their prayers and by their witness, and with the spiritual guidance and human help of every member of the people, including its leaders.

In conclusion, I renew my gratitude and appreciation to all of you, the civil and ecclesiastical authorities of South Sudan, for taking part in this retreat. To all the dear South Sudanese people I express my fervent good wishes of peace and prosperity. May the Merciful God touch the heart of every man and every woman in South Sudan, fill them with his grace and blessings, and bring forth rich fruits of lasting peace, even as the waters of the Nile, flowing through your country, bring life and abundant growth. Finally, I confirm my desire and hope that soon, by God's grace, I will be able to visit your beloved nation, together with my dear brothers here present: the Archbishop of Canterbury and the former Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland.

A final prayer

4. I would like to conclude this meditation with a prayer, following the invitation of the Saint Paul. The Apostle wrote: "First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way" (1 Tim 2:1-2).

Holy Father, God of infinite goodness, you call us to be renewed in your Spirit, and you show your power above all in the grace of forgiveness. We recognize your fatherly love when, in a world torn by dissension and discord, you touch human hearts and open them to reconciliation. How often have men and women broken your

covenant! Yet, instead of abandoning them, you renewed your bond with them through Jesus, your Son and our Redeemer: a bond so firm that it can never be broken.

We ask you, then, to touch with the power of the Spirit the depths of every human heart, so that enemies will be open to dialogue, adversaries will join hands and peoples will meet in harmony. By your gift, Father, may the whole-hearted search for peace resolve disputes, may love conquer hatred and may revenge be disarmed by forgiveness, so that, relying solely on your mercy, we may find our way back to you. Make us open to the promptings of the Holy Spirit, so that we may live a new life in Christ, in everlasting praise of your name and in the service of our brothers and sisters (cf. *Prefaces of Eucharistic Prayers for Reconciliation I and II*). Amen.

Dear brothers and sisters, may peace be with us, and may it dwell in our hearts forever!

And to you three, who have signed the peace Agreement, I ask, as a brother: remain in peace. I ask you this wholeheartedly. Let us go forwards. There will be many problems, but do not be fearful, go forwards, solve the problems. You have begun a process: may it finish well. There will be disagreements between you both, yes. These also should remain in the office, but before the people, hands united. In this way, as ordinary citizens you will become Fathers of the Nation. Allow me to ask you this from the heart and with my deepest sentiments.
