



The Holy See

APOSTOLIC JOURNEY OF HIS HOLINESS POPE FRANCIS
TO THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO AND SOUTH SUDAN
(ECUMENICAL PEACE PILGRIMAGE TO SOUTH SUDAN)
[31 January - 5 February 2023]

IN-FLIGHT PRESS CONFERENCE

Papal flight from South Sudan
Sunday, 5 February 2023

[[Multimedia](#)]

Introduction (M. Bruni)

Good day to everyone. Clearly, this has been a special trip, special because of the things we have seen and heard, but also because it is a trip that came about as a pilgrimage of companionship, a pilgrimage for peace and in companionship, as is quite evident here and now. I would ask the journalists when it is time to ask their questions to indicate to whom they are addressed, since with us, together with the Holy Father, are the Moderator General of the Scottish Presbyterian Church, and you all know Archbishop Welby of Canterbury. Before beginning, though, I would ask His Holiness if he wants to say something to us.

Pope Francis:

Happy Sunday and thank you for your work in these days. This has been an ecumenical journey with my two brothers and so I also wanted them to be present in the press conference, especially the Archbishop of Canterbury, since he has been involved for years in this path of reconciliation. He has done much work on this before me. That is why I wanted them both to be present.

Archbishop Welby:

Good afternoon and thank you very much. And, Your Holiness, thank you. In 2014, in January, my wife and I visited South Sudan as part of a series of trips around the Anglican Communion. And on arriving, we were asked by the Archbishop, the Anglican Archbishop, to go up to a town called Bor. The civil war had been raging for about five weeks at the time and was very fierce. When we got up to Bor, we went up in a single-engine aircraft and landed on a deserted airfield and with the first bodies at the gate of the airfield. There were 3000 unburied bodies in Bor at the time and there had been 5000. There were a few UN and a lot of troops around. We went to the cathedral where all the clergy had been murdered, the Anglican clergy, their wives had been raped and then murdered. It was a terrible situation.

On the way back, both my wife and I felt a deep call to see what we could do to support the people of South Sudan. And from there, in one of the regular meetings that I have the privilege of having with Pope Francis, we spoke a lot about South Sudan and developed the idea of a retreat at the Vatican. My team at Lambeth, together with the Vatican, went, from about 2016, visited South Sudan most months and spent time working out in the field and working with leaders to try and set up this visit. My wife went and worked with bishops' wives and women leaders again, who themselves were under enormous pressure, and we visited leaders who were in exile in Uganda.

In 2018, it became clear that there was going to be a possibility of a visit in early 2019, and we managed it. It was a miracle that it happened. One of the vice-presidents was in house arrest in Khartoum. I remember the day before the visit – I was flying to Rome very early the next morning for the visit. It was 36 hours the day before – I stood in a school car park in Nottingham in England, ringing the UN Secretary General in order to get him to clear the way, which he did very brilliantly, and give a visa to the vice-president who got the last flight out of Khartoum just before the airspace closed because of the coup d'état.

The high point of the 2019 conference was obviously the unforgettable sight of the Pope kneeling to kiss the feet of the leaders and saying, 'I beg you to make peace' while they tried to stop him. It took your mind straight away to the 13th chapter of John's Gospel. It was a most remarkable moment. We had some very tough conversations, and at one point the vice presidents went separately to a meeting, which was pretty intense, but they ended up committing to renew the peace agreement. And I think that moment of the Pope's was the key moment, was the turning point.

But as a former football manager in England said, you're only as good as your next match. And COVID delayed the next match very seriously. I think the result of that was a loss of momentum in the peace process. And as we came to this visit, the teams continued to go, but they were less confident than in 2019.

So I've ended this visit with a deep sense of encouragement, not so much that there was a breakthrough, but there was a sense, to use a past phrase from the Pope, of heart speaking to

heart. It was not at the intellectual level that there was contact, as you may have noticed at the various gatherings where there were speeches. The heart spoke to the heart. And we... There is a momentum at middle level and at the grassroots. And what we now need is a serious change of heart from the leadership. They have to agree to a process that will lead to a peaceful transition of power. They've been told this publicly. We've said it to them. There has to be an end to corruption and gun smuggling and the amassing of huge quantities of weapons. That will require further work together with the Vatican and Lambeth, but most of all with governments, the troika, to turn this open door, which is not open as wide as I would like, which is open, to crash, open the door and actually make progress. There's basically a bit under two years till the elections, the end of '24. We need serious progress by the end of '23. I'll hand over to the Moderator to say a word.

Moderator Greenshields:

Thank you, Archbishop. My experience is obviously very different from the Pope and the Archbishop, in that this is my first time in South Sudan. However, it's not my church's first time in South Sudan because a previous Moderator had travelled into what was, in his estimation, an extremely vulnerable situation. Reconciliation, forgiveness, were at the very heart of the conversation and dialogue that took place then in 2015. People were invited to come to Scotland to reflect and to train and to go back to South Sudan. Now that's within the Presbyterian constituency of South Sudan.

I would echo what my friend said there, that strong words have been spoken. The truth has been spoken. To the heart as well as to the mind. I think the situation now clearly is this: that actions speak louder than words. We were invited by the government and the churches to go there as a friend would invite you to come into their room, into their house. And that invitation was one where we were asked to help in whatever way we could to make a difference in that situation, to meet with our partners, to try in whatever way we could to speak to those in power. That's been done. Now it's up to those who can make a difference to start the process urgently. And that's what is asked for by us in this visit.

Q: Jean-Baptiste Malenge (RTCE-Radio Catholique Elikya ASBL)

Holy Father, you have longed to visit the DRC... you have seen the joy... What importance would you assign the agreement signed in 2016 between the Holy See and the DRC on education and health?

Pope Francis:

First, the Agreement. Sorry, I am not familiar with that agreement; however, the Secretariat of State is here and can offer an opinion. I know there has recently been work on an Agreement between the Holy See and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, but I don't know and I am

unable to answer that. I don't even know the difference between the new one that is on the way and the other. These matters are handled by the Secretariat of State, the Secretary of State and, more closely, by Archbishop Gallagher, who is here, on the political part of the relations of the Holy See with States. They are good at making Agreements that benefit everyone.

I saw there in the Congo a great desire to move forward, and so much culture. Before coming here, I had a Zoom meeting a few months ago with a group of very intelligent African university students. You have people of great intelligence – this is one of your riches: intelligent young people and space must be made for them, rather than shutting doors. Having so many natural riches that attract people to come and exploit Congo – pardon the word – this idea is present: 'Africa has to be exploited.' Some say – I don't know if it is true – that former colonial empires granted independence from the ground up, but not underground, so they come for minerals. Africa has its own dignity. And Congo in this regard is at a high level. We have to rid ourselves of the idea that Africa is there to be exploited.

Talking about exploitation, I am pained by the problems in the east, which is a problem of a war of exploitation. In the Congo I was able to meet with victims of that war. Terrible. People wounded, mutilated. There was great pain, and all for the sake of appropriating wealth. This is not acceptable. Not acceptable. Congo has so many possibilities.

But to return to your question on Congo, it has so many possibilities.

Archbishop Welby:

I don't know the west of Congo so well. My wife has been there again, working with women in conflict. But I was... I've done a lot of traveling in the East the last time in 2018, just before COVID. And I want to agree wholeheartedly with what His Holiness has said. We need to be clear. Congo is not the playground of the great powers or for the piracy of the small mining companies. The companies there act irresponsibly with artisanal mining, kidnap - the use of child soldiers, rape on a huge scale and they simply pillage the country. That country should be one of the richest on the face of the planet. One of the biggest grantors of aid to the rest of Africa. It has been tortured. It was given political independence technically, but no economic independence.

And all the experience of the East - I was last there during Ebola, right in the middle of the militia area, and we were training pastors in how to work with Ebola of all kinds... The churches are doing extraordinary work there. The only functional group, particularly, Father, the Roman Catholic Church, does wonderful work. The Great Lakes Peace Project, led by the Roman Catholic Church, is wonderful, but the great powers have to say: 'Africa and Congo in particular hold so much in the way of the ore and the metals and the minerals and the resources that we will need round the world, if the world economy is to go green and save the planet from climate change.' And the only way that that can be done in a way that does not cover our hands with blood is if the great powers

seek the peace of the Congo and not merely their prosperity.

Moderator Greenshields:

I don't want to add too much because I think that was a very eminent answer to it. But it's a warning, isn't it, to those of us who have. But I think that it was something that the Pope mentioned here about young people. Bright, good young minds deserve the opportunity to develop. Now, from my own experience in other parts of the world, bright young female minds deserve the right to the same opportunities exactly as any others in whatever country, but especially in the developing countries. And that would be my plea. The rights of women and young women in particular have to be recognised as paramount.

Q: Jean-Luc Mootosamy (CAPAV)

From Mauritius and covering also for South Sudanese Radio, which is exiled in Nairobi. In both DRC and South Sudan, violence spreads despite the presence of, decades of presence of two United Nations missions. How can you, as one, help in recommending a new model of intervention, given the growing temptation of many disappointed African nations to choose other partners for their security partners who may not respect international law? Like Russian private companies, organizations in the Sahel region, for example. Thank you.

Pope Francis:

Violence is a daily issue. We have just seen it in South Sudan. It is painful to see how violence is provoked. One of the points is the sale of weapons. Archbishop Welby also said something about this. The sale of arms: I think this is the biggest scourge in the world. The trade in... the sale of arms. Someone who understands these matters told me that with the money that would come from not selling arms for a year, hunger in our world could be ended. I don't know if that's true. But at the top of the list today is the selling of arms. And not only among the great powers, also with these poor people. This way they sow war among these people. It's cruel. They tell them, 'Go to war!' and they give them weapons. Because behind it there are economic interests to exploit the land, the minerals, the wealth.

It is true that tribalism in Africa does not help. Now I don't really know how it is in South Sudan, but I think it is there too. There needs to be dialogue between the different tribes. I remember when I was in Kenya, in the stadium everyone stood up and said "no to tribalism, no to tribalism!" True, every tribe has its own history, there are old enmities, different cultures. But it is also true that fighting between tribes is provoked by selling arms and then one can exploit the land of both tribes. This is diabolical. I cannot think of another word. This is destruction: destroying creation, destroying the person, destroying society.

I don't know if it also happens in South Sudan but it does happen in some countries: young children are recruited to be part of the militia and fight, as young children. It is very painful.

To sum up, I think the biggest problem is the eagerness to take that country's wealth - coltan, lithium, these sorts of things – through war, for which they sell weapons and they exploit even children.

Moderator Greenshields:

I think one of the issues that comes to mind with respect to this, is the high degree of illiteracy that exists within countries, in which case people don't have a clear understanding of who they are and where they are and making educated choices. That's one thing. We certainly have to challenge the arms race, where people make more money through that than the world and probably anything else. How we do that is through persuasion and how we overcome division is through dialogue.

I want to just give you one small story about Scotland, the country that I come from, which was religiously a deeply divided country where we had terrible things happening, terrible violence, terrible division within our nation. There then began a process of dialogue between ourselves, the Church of Scotland and the Catholic Church in Scotland that arrived at the point last year where we signed a declaration of friendship, where we would walk together in our differences, but also in agreement with the things that we agree with. And it's only when you can get to that stage of dialogue and encounter with the other person that you start to bring down those walls. And that's what we've noticed in Scotland. And what when I was young, was a deeply divided country and is changing. And education, too, helps to do that.

Archbishop Welby:

I want to take a different tack because it was a very good, very helpful question. It's not the it's not the UN *or* other things. It is 'and.' It's always 'and' rather than 'or.'

What the churches bring is not only functional networks where they're almost uncorrupt. And so when you put aid in, it gets to the people on the ground; and their networks that cross the fighting lines, and all the rest of it. On Saturday, our archbishop in Kajo Keji buried twenty people. He went straight down there. He was back Saturday evening. He had made a big difference. It's the change of heart. And that's the point of this visit.

A hundred and thirty years ago, hundred years ago, the Nuer and the Dinka were constantly at war. It was a vendetta culture. The Nuer, in particular, were at war with clans among themselves, as well. Cattle raiding. The difference was not made by the colonial government. It was made by the churches and the change of heart, as people received faith in Christ and realized there was a new way to live.

So my prayer at the end of this visit is not just lots of activism, but also that the Holy Spirit of God brings a new spirit of reconciliation and healing to the people of South Sudan.

Q: Claudio Lavanga (NBC NEWS)

Holy Father I wanted to ask you, since Archbishop Welby recalled that incredible moment in 2019 when you knelt before the leaders of South Sudan to ask for peace. Unfortunately, in two weeks' time, it will be the first anniversary of another terrible conflict, the one in Ukraine, and my question is: Would you be prepared to make the same gesture towards Vladimir Putin if you had the chance to meet him, since your appeals for peace so far have fallen on deaf ears? And I wanted to ask all three of you if you would like to make a joint appeal for peace in Ukraine, as this is a rare moment when you are all three [together]?

Pope Francis:

I am open to meeting both presidents: the President of Ukraine and the President of Russia – I am open to a meeting. If I have not gone to Kyiv, it is because it was not possible at the time to go to Moscow; but I was in dialogue, and indeed, on the second day of the war, I went to the Russian Embassy to say that I wanted to go to Moscow to talk to Putin, provided there was a small window to negotiate. Then Minister Lavrov replied, “Good”, that he was taking this into consideration, but [said], “We’ll see later”. That gesture was something considered, saying ‘I’ll do it for him’.

But the gesture of the 2019 meeting, I don't know how it happened; it wasn't thought out, and you can't repeat things that weren't thought out – it's the Spirit who takes you there, period, and I have also forgotten it. It was a service, I was an instrument of some inner impulse, it was not something planned.

Today we are..., but this is not the only war. I would like to be fair. For twelve, thirteen years now Syria has been at war, for more than ten years Yemen has been at war; think of Myanmar, of the poor Rohingya people who travel around the world because they have been driven out of their homeland. Everywhere, in Latin America... how many hotbeds of war there are! Yes, there are more important wars because of the noise they make, but, I don't know, the whole world is at war, and in the process of self-destruction. We have to think seriously. It is in a process of self-destruction. We must stop in time, because one bomb leads to another, bigger one, then one even bigger, and in the escalation, you don't know where you will end up. We need to have a cool head.

Then both Archbishop Welby and Moderator Greenshields spoke of women. I have seen women in South Sudan: they bear children, sometimes they are alone, but they have the strength to create a country; women are impressive, they are the ones making things happen. Men go to fight, they go to war, and these women with two, three, four, five children forge on. I have seen them in South Sudan. And speaking of women, I'd like to say a word to the religious sisters, the sisters

who get involved. I've seen some of them here in South Sudan, and then at today's Mass you heard the names of all those sisters who were killed, slaughtered... But let us go back to the strength of women. We need to take them seriously and not just use them to advertise cosmetics! Please, this is an insult to women; women are meant for greater things!

As to the other point, I already mentioned it but let's look at the wars that are in the world.

Archbishop Welby:

I talked about Russia and President Putin and Ukraine when I was there at the end of November, early December. I've really nothing to add, except to say that an end to this war is within the hands of President Putin. He could end it with withdrawal and ceasefire and then negotiations about long-term settlement. But it can't... It is a terrifying and a terrible war.

But I want to agree with Pope Francis. There are many other wars. I talk every few weeks to the head of our church in Myanmar. I talk to church leaders in Nigeria – 40 people killed in fighting in Katsina yesterday. I talk to many around the world. I entirely agree with the Holy Father. And no war ends without the involvement of women and of young people for exactly the reasons he said.

Q: Bruce De Galzain (Radio France)

Holy Father, before departing on your Apostolic Journey you denounced the criminalization of homosexuality, which is not accepted by families either in South Sudan or in Congo. This week in Kinshasa I met five homosexuals, each of whom had been rejected and even expelled from their families. They explained to me that their rejection comes from their parents' religious upbringing – some of them are taken to exorcist priests because their families believe they are possessed by unclean spirits. My question, Holy Father, is: what do you say to the families in Congo and South Sudan who still reject their children, and what do you say to the priests, to the bishops?

Pope Francis:

I have spoken about this problem on two journeys: first, on my return from Brazil: "If a person with homosexual tendencies is a believer and is seeking God, who am I to judge him?" I said this on that trip. Second, returning from Ireland – it was a somewhat problematic trip because that day a letter had been released from that young man... – there, I said clearly to parents: "Children who have this orientation have a right to stay at home; you cannot throw them out of the house; they have a right on this". And recently I said something – I don't recall my exact words – in the interview with the Associated Press.

The criminalization of homosexuality is an issue that must not be disregarded. It is estimated that, more or less fifty countries, in one way or another, lead to this criminalization. Some say more,

let's say at least fifty. And some of these – I think it's ten – even have the death penalty, more or less openly. This is not just. People with homosexual tendencies are children of God. God loves them. God accompanies them. It is true that some are in this state because of various situations that were not of their own choice, but to condemn a person like this is a sin; to criminalize people with homosexual tendencies is an injustice. I am not talking about groups, but about individuals. It can be said, "But they have groups that make a lot of noise..." Individuals. Lobbies are something else. I am talking about individuals. And I think that in the Catechism of the Catholic Church there is a phrase [that says] that they are not to be marginalized. I think this point is clear.

Archbishop Welby:

It may not have entirely escaped your notice that, in the Church of England, we've been talking about this "just a little" recently, including a good deal of debate in Parliament and all kinds of things. I want to say I wish I had spoken as eloquently and clearly as the Pope. I entirely agree with every word he said there. The criminalization – the Church of England, the Anglican Communion – has passed resolutions at two Lambeth conferences against criminalization, but it has not really changed many people's mind.

Over the next four days in the General Synod of the Church of England, this is our main topic of discussion, and I shall certainly quote the Holy Father. He said it beautifully and accurately.

Moderator Greenshields:

Just a very short observation: There is nowhere in my reading of the four Gospels where I see Jesus turning anyone away. There is nowhere in the four Gospels where I see anything other than Jesus expressing love to whoever he meets. And as Christians, that's the only expression that we can possibly give to any human being in any circumstances.

Alexander Hecht (ORF TV)

A question to the Pope: there has been much talk in recent days about unity. There has also been a demonstration of Christian unity in South Sudan, and also of unity within the Catholic Church itself. I would like to ask you if you feel this after the death of Benedict XVI: have your job and your mission been more difficult for you, because of tensions between the different wings of the Catholic Church have become stronger?

Pope Francis:

On this point, I would like to say that I was able to talk about everything with Pope Benedict, and to exchange opinions, and he was always at my side and supportive; and if he had any difficulty he told me so, and we would talk and there were no problems.

Once I spoke to him about marriage between homosexual persons, about the fact that marriage is a sacrament and we cannot create a sacrament, but there is a possibility of protecting property through civil law. This started in France – I don't remember what it is called... [but] any person can form a civil union, not necessarily as a couple, elderly retired women [can] enter into a civil union... and so forth. Someone who considered himself a great theologian went to Pope Benedict through a friend of his and made a complaint against me. Benedict was not taken aback; he called four Cardinals who were first-rate theologians and said, "Explain this to me", which they did. And so the story ended.

This is an anecdote that shows how Benedict acted whenever there was a complaint. Some stories going around that Benedict was upset with what the new Pope was doing are "Chinese whispers". In fact, I consulted Benedict for some decisions to be taken and he was in agreement.

I think that Benedict's death was exploited by people for their own benefit. People who, in one way or another, exploit such a good person, such a man of God, I would almost say a holy Father of the Church, those people are unethical, partisan not ecclesial... Everywhere one sees a tendency to turn theological views into parties and then end up this way. Enough. These things will fall on their own, or some will not fall but go forward, as has happened many times in the Church's history. I wanted to state clearly who Benedict was; he was not upset.

Jorge Barcia Antelo (RNE)

Good morning, Your Holiness. We return today from two countries that are victims of what you have called the globalization of indifference. You have been talking about this since the beginning of your pontificate and since your trip to Lampedusa. In a way, a circle has been closed this week. Are you still thinking of extending the radius of this circle, of going elsewhere, of visiting other forgotten countries? What places are you thinking of going to? And after this journey that has been so long and demanding, how are you? Are you still feeling strong? Do you feel your health is good enough to go to all these places?

Pope Francis

It depends on the menu! I speak of the globalization of indifference, but there is something at the heart of your question...

Yes, it is true that everywhere there is the globalization of indifference, even within a country. Many people have forgotten to look at their compatriots, their fellow citizens, have put them aside so as not to think about them. It makes us think that the greatest fortunes in the world are in the hands of a minority, and these people don't look at situations of dire poverty, they don't open their hearts to help these situations.

As for journeys: I think India will be next, next year. On 29 September I will go to Marseilles, and there is the possibility that from Marseilles I will fly to Mongolia, but it has not yet been fixed. It's possible. And then another one this year. Lisbon.

But the criterion is: I chose to visit the smallest countries in Europe. People will say: "But he went to France," no, I went to Strasbourg; I will go to Marseilles, not to France. The little ones, the little ones, to get to know a little about the hidden Europe, that part of Europe that has so much culture but is not known by everyone. To accompany countries, for example, Albania, which was the first one, and the country that suffered the cruelest dictatorship in history. Then, my choice is basically this: to try not to fall into the globalization of indifference myself.

[In reply to a question about his health:] You know [the saying] that weeds will never die! It's not like at the beginning of the pontificate, but really this knee is annoying, but it is getting there slowly, so let's see. Thank you.

Archbishop Welby:

Certainly this is the best airline I've ever flown on. So I'd be delighted to go... But joking aside, yes, if the Holy Father felt that I added any value, or the Archbishop in the future added any value, it is always a huge privilege. It depends where it is and whether we would be a hindrance or a help.

Moderator Greenshields:

We would certainly be delighted to do something like this again. The only caveat I would add to that is that I finish my role on the 20th of May, and a very capable woman will be taking over as the Moderator of the Church of Scotland, but she will be delighted to do the same thing!