

A Brief Reflection on the Historic Visit of Pope Francis to South Sudan. 3 – 5 February, 2023

“Lord, make me an instrument of thy PEACE,
Where there is hatred, let me sow LOVE,
Where there’s despair in life, let me bring HOPE”

St Francis of Assisi

South Sudan is the world’s youngest country. It gained its independence only in 2011. Despite its oil wealth and fertile land, the country suffers from a low GDP and is rated to be one of the poorest countries in the world. Since 2013, the young country has been ravaged by political and ethnic conflicts, leaving its people facing one of the gravest humanitarian crises in the region that rarely makes headlines. As a result of these constant politically and ethnically motivated conflicts, thousands of South Sudanese today live as refugees in IDP camps within the country as well as in the neighbouring countries.

It is important to note that Christianity is the country’s major religion. with over 61% of the population affiliated with the Catholic, Episcopal and Presbyterian churches respectively.

At the Good Shepherd Peace Centre in Kit, we run a hospitality centre where different groups of people come to hold various programs for example, trauma healing, formators’ forum, assemblies, retreats, training sessions for staff, within a peaceful environment such that GSPC exists to offer.

Just one month after my arrival here, we hosted the Diocesan Assembly of the diocese of Malakal. The diocese couldn’t hold their assembly in Malakal as there was serious fighting going on in and around that region at the time. As such the Bishop of the diocese had to transport 80 members comprising Priests, Sisters, Catechists and the laity to Kit where they could hold their assembly in peace.

At the RSASS (Religious Superiors’ Association of South Sudan) Assembly that also took place here, last year, 2022, I was deeply struck by how many of these men and women religious, men and women of courage, working mostly with people at the grassroots expressed the feeling of helplessness and indeed almost hopelessness over any possibility of change in the government and in lives of the people, despite their hard work. On a regular basis, people are being killed, maimed, raped, made homeless as they move around the country to dodge the ever-shifting mosaic of violence, with the spirit of vengeance deeply embedded within.

In my encounters with different people, many have wondered what has been the follow-up on the side of the local church regarding the Pope’s 2019 invitation of the President, Salva Kiir, his Vice Riek Machar and some South Sudan Politicians to the Vatican for a retreat that was followed by that powerful gesture of the Holy Father going on his knees and kissing their feet to plead for a “new age of peace and prosperity”. The people of South Sudan would have wished the local church had been more proactive in expending more energy on breathing life into this impelling gesture by the Pope. Somehow not much was being done at that level, or either, their efforts were often met with frustrations. However, certainly people on ground never felt much, if any, impact at all from that retreat at the Vatican in 2019. Thus, the feelings of disillusionment, hopelessness and abandonment from every

angle, the government and the church, are always very obvious when talking with people. It behoves every Christian at every level, to feed this fire of Peace that the Pope has ignited. Our local church leaders, elders and traditional rulers need to seize this moment of grace to work relentlessly with those at the topmost rung of government to bury their political differences, come together and in the spirit of mutual respect, correct the corrupt and unjust systems within the government and stop the violence and killings taking place on daily basis unchecked. It is only thus that Justice and Peace can be restored once again in the land.

In the light of the above, the historic visit of Pope Francis, joined by the Archbishop of Canterbury, His Grace Dr Justin Welby and the Presbyterian Head of the Church of Scotland, the Rt. Rev. Dr Iain Greenshields, is a strong statement to this young country that Christians worldwide stand solidly with them in their struggles against political or ethnic conflicts, corruption, injustices of all kinds, violence, particularly violence against women and the untold suffering many face having to live as refugees, far away from their farmlands, far away from their kith and kin.

The visit was a great moment of WITNESSING to the fact that God loves and cares for all His people. God never abandons His own. A confirmation of the proverb that says:

“When we take one step towards God, He takes seven steps towards us”! Indian proverb

Last Saturday, as the Pope, the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Moderator arrived at the jam-packed stadium, the two Biblical story scenes that came to mind were the Visitation of Elizabeth by Mary and the Presentation of Jesus in the Temple. Just like the child leapt for joy in Elizabeth’s womb at the sound of Mary’s greetings, so was there a thunderous and joyful outburst of songs of welcome, interspersed with high-pitched ululations, dancing and waving of the Vatican flag and their national flag. The visit had brought the country ‘A Present of PRESENCE, a Presence that brings renewed HOPE and BELIEF in the never-ending Love, Care, Faithfulness and Companionship and Compassion of God, the Father of us all. The visit was a strong reminder to us of an African proverb:

“Our human compassion binds us together, the one to the other, not in pity or patronizingly, but as human beings who have learnt how to turn our common suffering into HOPE for the future”.

The epoch-making visit was also a clear learning for us all that conflicts, gun battles and show of force can never restore absolute peace among any warring groups. Only Non-Violence is the Supreme law of life! This takes courage, strength to forgive, humility, obedience and great maturity, and done in the spirit of justice and with a renewed sense of solidarity and care for one another.

In prayer and through his speeches, the Pope urged that, just like Nelson Mandela said,

“We owe our children and our women, the most vulnerable citizens in any society, a life free from violence and fear”, and with emotion in his voice, he called for “a battle against corruption”, and an end to “bloodshed and mutual recriminations. Enough!”:

The Pope warned that:

“History itself will remember you if you work for the benefit of this people that you have been called to serve, Future generations will either venerate your names or cancel their memory, based on what you do now”.

This visit by the Holy Father and the two world leaders of the Episcopalian and Presbyterian Churches was indeed a clarion call to both the government and people of South Sudan to wake up to this moment of grace as Christians and:

“let your hearts be broken and not your garments torn” *Joel 2:13*

At the end of the Closing Mass, the Holy father commended South Sudan into the loving care and protection of our Blessed Mother Mary, the Queen of PEACE and St. Josephine Bakhita, a South Sudanese Saint, who herself was kidnapped and sold into slavery. Today, as a woman of great hope and faith in God, she is the Patron Saint for victims of modern day slavery and human trafficking. He urged us to continue to pray unceasingly to these two powerful women of God as we walk together on South Sudan’s path towards healing, recovery and a sustainable PEACE!

St. Josephine Bakhita, Pray for us.

Our Lady Queen of Peace, Pray for us.