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Celestial hope, terrestrial scepticism

On his Africa trip, Pope Francis criticised the ongoing exploitation of the continent. We report from South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo

South Sudan

There was no shortage of hope in the South Sudanese capital, Juba, during the Pope's recent visit. Yet it was a hope born out of despair – not out of any confidence that the pontifical stop-over will lead the country's political and military elites to change their ways for good.

It has been almost four years since the Pope received South Sudan's political leaders in Rome and, quite literally, kissed their feet. This incredibly powerful display of humbleness was intended not just to demonstrate the pope's own humility, but also to inspire this quality in those governing the world's newest nation. Nevertheless, for most people in South Sudan, peace is now further away than it was then. Joining an ecumenical delegation on a pilgrimage for peace to the country, the Archbishop of Canterbury spoke for many of its citizens when he bemoaned that 'we had hoped and prayed for more. We expected more. You promised more.'

In the nation's capital, Juba, a fragile peace between the elites has held since 2018 – primarily due to the fact that for all those in the transitional government, the deal isn't at all bad. Yet four and half years after this preliminary agreement was reached, it remains incomplete and its terms are being executed slowly, if at all. Last August, the parties agreed to extend it for another transitional period of two years. Outside of the capital, meanwhile, peace is not even fragile: it is barely noticeable. The number of those affected by famine is higher now than it has ever been, with 70 per cent of the population dependent on humanitarian aid. Every day, all across the country, people continue to lose their homes, possessions, even lives in smouldering local conflicts, ignored (or, in some cases, actively fanned) by political elites.

This sorry state of affairs has been worsened by devastating floods brought by climate change, with hundreds of thousands of South Sudanese losing their livelihoods and forced to flee; the next floods are already expected. In addition, acts of violence lead to new feuds and provoke revenge killings, leaving peace looking more distant than ever before. On the eve of the papal visit, at least 27 civilians were killed in a punishment attack in Kajo Keji – and some reports say that the victims included a pregnant woman and several children.

Many South Sudanese would like to see their government going to similar efforts for their own population – and the papal visit shows that, if pressed, the administration can get things done.

As such, the Pope's kiss took place against a backdrop of dashed hopes, a backdrop which also shapes expectations about what the visit can achieve. Several armed groups who did not sign up to the 2018 peace accord continue to rebel against the transitional government, and in November 2022, the administration suspended the Rome peace talks brokered by the Italian laymen's movement Sant'Egidio. While the President did announce that the negotiations would start again during Pope Francis' visit, the degree to which – in view of recent clashes – this can be taken seriously, is doubtful.

And so public discourse in the country's capital is less about whether the Pope's visit can lead to peace and more about the government's efforts to impress him with a clean and spruced-up city. In Juba, streets along which Francis was to travel were hurriedly tarred, some were washed in the dusty heat of February; one was even renamed in his honour. Many South Sudanese would like to see their government going to similar efforts for their own population – and the papal visit shows that, if pressed, the administration can get things done. On Twitter, young South Sudanese users responded with cynicism: 'Why can't the Pontiff visit every place in the country? That way, its infrastructure would finally be in for an upgrade!'

If there is anything to realistically hope for, it would be that the country's churches might draw some sustenance from the Pope's presence and the ongoing support from the Vatican as well as from the Anglican and Presbyterian churches – and that they might, in the future, be more active in their representations to political leaders for peace, for full compliance with the accord, and for accountability to the population. Historically, the church has played a key role in South Sudan, but it too has not been completely shielded from the struggles between the country's various factions. So if, in the wake of the papal visit, the churches were now able to be more decisive as a force for peace and unity

in the young nation, especially with regards to the convention now underway to draft a constitution and the elections scheduled for 2024, this would be something that everyone in South Sudan would benefit from.

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The Democratic Republic of Congo

During his visit to the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), the Pope's presence created imposing images as he brought more than a million worshippers together for a service in the capital, Kinshasa, and called for an end to violence on the continent of Africa.

With around 60 per cent of the population as members, the influence of the Catholic Church in DRC is far-reaching – all the more so as many of these members are also practising Christians and going to church is an important societal event observed even in the metropolis of Kinshasa. Additionally, in many areas of education and health, the church replaces the state as a service provider, running many of the country's schools and hospitals.

Moreover, the Church is one of the key participants in the democratisation process, and historically, it has often played a decisive role in periods of transition: decolonialisation, the end of the Sese Seko Mobutu dictatorship, and – most recently – the transition from the regime of Joseph Kaliba to the current administration. The Church has set the tone of non-violent resistance to autocratic tendencies, of respect for the constitution, and of public participation by vote.

Under Kaliba, the Church oversaw the electoral commission and, by extension, voter registration. Now, in this year's elections, it will function as an observer, as in previous polls. In 2019, trust in the legitimacy of the electoral results was shaken when the figures published by the electoral commission failed to match the Church's exit polls.

In view of the media attention the Papal visit attracted, there were plenty of attempts by the current government under Félix Tshisekedi to hijack it for its own publicity purposes, and although himself a protestant, the President did not cease to point out that it was he who had invited the Pope.

For a population scarred by poverty and conflict, the pontifical visit was a sign of hope: Francis listened to those in the east of the country with stories of unspeakable violence to tell, admonished the international community to make the exploitative extraction of raw materials from Africa more equitable, and appealed to parties engaged in conflict to start reconciliation. In view of the horrific history of violence conflict in DRC, he emphasised the importance of the religious aspect of forgiveness – and took a position in marked contrast to the current political climate in the country, dominated by calls to drive out aggressors with military means.

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At the same time, he spoke for all those who have long criticised the West's wilful ignorance of the conditions in DRC. For many of the nation's inhabitants, it is almost unbearable to see how international solidarity has coalesced around the war in Ukraine, leaving other conflicts out of the public eye. In view of the growing dissatisfaction with a somewhat ineffectual UN peacekeeping mission, the DRC government has recently been making ever more frequent overtures to Russia, China and Turkey as these countries increase their economic activities in the country.

In respect of the discrepancy between a richness in raw materials on the one hand and poverty and underdevelopment on the other, Francis talked of a new form of economic colonialism lacking in respect for human and natural life, placing repeated emphasis on the value of every single human being – a value always higher than that of gold or diamonds.

Francis also had a few strong words for the country's government, criticising at a congregation of young Christians in the Martyrs' Stadium the corruption in the administration and the unfairness resulting from it. Following his words, some students in the crowd began to sing a song in Lingala directed against President Tshisekedi his 'thieving' politicians – and, on leaving the stadium, promptly detained for 34 hours by secret services operatives.

For the country's youth and those who suffer from endemic violence, the Pope offered words of encouragement; the attention he paid to them and his empathy with their travails strengthened their confidence and gave them a reason not to lose their belief in the possibility of a better future. Instead of falling victim to lethargy due to the harsh conditions they face, he explained, they should come together to try and turn things around.

Importantly, the opportunity his visit represented to speak openly about the violence so many have suffered will help the war-torn population to deal with its traumatic experiences.

In this way, if only for a brief moment, the Pope's visit focussed international attention on the problems of the Democratic Republic of Congo.

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