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Pope Francis watches as dancers perform during a meeting with young people and catechists

Pope Francis watches as dancers perform during a meeting with young people and catechists in Martyrs' Stadium in Kinshasa, Congo, Feb. 2. (CNS/Paul Haring)



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Kinshasa, Congo — February 2, 2023
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Pope Francis on Feb. 2 urged 65,000 Congolese young people to resist the "poisonous temptation" of corruption that has long plagued the nation and to choose a different future for themselves.

"Keep your hands clean," the pope cautioned. "For hands that traffic in easy money get stained with blood."

Francis' words may have particular resonance in a country beset by decades of endemic corruption, where political leaders have embezzled millions of dollars and personally profited from the country's enviable mineral reserves while the overwhelming majority of the nation continues to live in poverty.

Going off script, the pope led the tens of thousands of young people in a spontaneous chant of "no to corruption" — with some people seated near the country's political leaders turning to directly face Congo's top power brokers as they joined in the chorus.

"If someone offers you a bribe, or promises you favors and lots of money, do not fall into the trap. Do not be deceived," said Francis. "Do not trust shady financial schemes that plunge you into the darkness."

The pope's remarks came during a super-charged meeting with young people and Catholic catechism teachers in Martyrs Stadium — the largest sporting arena in the country — on the final full day of his visit here in Congo's capital.

In a country where some 67% of the population is under age 24, the 86-year-old Francis received a welcome akin to a rock star, thrilling the massive crowd that repeatedly interrupted his speech with deafening applause and cheers. At one point an organizer was forced to calm the crowd so the pope could continue his address.



Six-year-old Laurent Pasinya dresses as a cardinal at Pope Francis' meeting with young people in Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of Congo on Feb. 2. (NCR photo/Christopher White)

Francis seemed to delight in the rapturous response, encouraging the crowd to harness that energy and to broaden their horizons to avoid past mistakes that stem from deep-seated suspicions of different ethnic groups.

"Do not ruin your youth by becoming isolated and closed in on yourselves," he said.

"Beware of regionalism, tribalism, or anything that makes you feel secure in your own group, but at the same time is unconcerned with the life of the community," said the pope. "You know what happens: first, you believe in prejudices about others, then you justify hatred, then violence, and in the end, you find yourself in the middle of a war."

In recent decades, ethnic infighting and conflict among armed rebel groups have killed an estimated 6 million people, in what Francis called a "forgotten genocide" during his first speech to the nation on Jan. 31.

"The Democratic Republic of the Congo expects from your hands a different future, for that future is in your hands," he told the youth gathered at the stadium.

One young child seemed eager to take up the pope's calling, as 6-year-old Laurent Pasinya, dressed in scarlet red as a young cardinal, wowed onlookers as he walked around with a faux crozier.

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As Francis circled the stadium in the popemobile ahead of the meeting, another young man ran alongside him draped in a Congolese flag and a banner that read, in French, "Peace in the DRC."

One attendee, 20-year-old Deo Phines Zola Maku, who is the president of the youth group at his local parish here in the nation's capital, said the pope's words on war and the need for peaceful elections had particular salience.

"Young people are so mobilized," he told NCR. "You see the stadium is full because we want to meet the pope. We want to keep hearing his message."

As Brigitte Nyuwa, a local catechist waited for the pope's arrival, she reflected on the ongoing war in the country's east. The day before, on Feb. 1, Francis had met with nearly two dozen victims of sexual assault and physical mutilation and condemned the "insatiable greed" of the country's warring factions that continue to foment violence.

Such instability, said Nyuwa, means "people are obliged to leave their villages and not knowing where to go."

"The pope is not just here for us in the capital but for those people, too, who have become poorer and poorer," she told NCR. "I hope that following his visit we will try to put into practice what he told us. We can't be happy here with people in the other part of the country crying there."

During the afternoon of Feb. 2, Francis met with some 1,200 representatives of the country's priests and religious men and women at Kinshasa's Our Lady of the Congo cathedral, where he told them to reject a clericalist mentality and be, first and foremost, "servants of the people."

"Let us never forget that the priesthood and consecrated life become arid if we start to think that people are there to serve us, rather than ourselves being here to serve them," said the pope.

Francis went on to warn against spiritual mediocrity and priests who indulge in world comfort and forms of superficiality that make them unrelatable to their flock, the majority of whom live on less than $2.15 a day.

"Often, in situations of poverty and suffering, there is a great risk of worldliness, the desire to take advantage of our position in order to satisfy our own needs and comforts," he warned."

Francis told them to remember their calling in order to avoid becoming "cold bureaucrats of the spirit."

Prior to departing Congo tomorrow, Feb. 3, Francis will meet with the country's Catholic bishops. He is then set to embark on an historic ecumenical visit to war-torn South Sudan, where he is to join the heads of the Church of England and Church of Scotland for what the pope has described as a "pilgrimage of peace."

This story appears in the **Pope Francis in Congo and South Sudan** feature series. View the full series.