Vatican

Anglican Archbishop Justin Welby, Pope Francis and Rev. Iain Greenshields, moderator of the

Anglican Archbishop Justin Welby, Pope Francis and Rev. Iain Greenshields, moderator of the Presbyterian Church of Scotland, attend an ecumenical prayer service at the John Garang Mausoleum in Juba, South Sudan, Feb. 4. (CNS/Paul Haring)



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Juba, South Sudan — February 4, 2023

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Pope Francis on Feb. 4 urged South Sudan's diverse Christian community not to be overcome by ethnic or tribal conflict that have defined the young nation's early history, but to see their shared faith as means of building a lasting peace.

"Those who claim to be believers should have nothing more to do with a culture based on the spirit of vengeance," said the pope, encouraging more than 50,000 people gathered in the nation's capital to commit to "spreading Jesus' way of non-violence."

The Gospel, he said, "contradicts every tribal understanding of religion."

Francis' remarks came during an ecumenical prayer service at the John Garang Mausoleum Square here in Juba, alongside archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby

and moderator of the Church of Scotland Iain Greenshields, as the three men continued their historic Feb. 3-5 "pilgrimage of peace," seeking to shore up unity in the overwhelmingly Christian nation.

In separate prayer services with their respective congregations on the morning of Feb. 4, the three church leaders shared similar messages that all believers, regardless of their tribe or ethnic group, must come together if the war-ravaged country wants to overcome years of incalcitrant divisions.

Young men sit on a truck as they attend an ecumenical prayer service attended by Pope Fran

Young men sit on a truck as they attend an ecumenical prayer service attended by Pope Francis at the John Garang Mausoleum in Juba, South Sudan, Feb. 4, 2023. (CNS/Paul Haring)

At a joint appearance at the presidential palace Feb. 3, Francis and the ecumenical leaders who have been intensely involved in holding together the country's fragile peace agreement issued a stern warning to the country's political leaders that history would judge them if they fail to work together and bring about peace.

As they gathered together here Feb. 4, Francis offered a similar message to all the country's Christians, reminding them it was Jesus' "heartfelt prayer" that all believers may be one.

"What Jesus teaches us is clear: we are to love everyone, since everyone is loved as a child of our common Father in heaven," the pope said. "The love of Christians is not only for those close to us, but for everyone, for in Jesus each person is our neighbor, our brother or sister — even our enemies."

Some participants walked 93 miles over nine days to be here for the pope's visit. Others, who live within the capital, spoke of the long hours it took them to reach the event by foot, given the city's lack of roads and infrastructure. Even so, at the joint prayer service, rosary-clutching men and women were seated alongside Anglicans and other Protestant Christians in joint solidarity representing what Welby described as the "fellowship of believers."

> 'The love of Christians is not only for those close to us, but for everyone, for in Jesus each person is our neighbor, our brother or sister — even our

enemies.'
—Pope Francis

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"The Gospel must not be just a beautiful religious philosophy, but a prophecy that becomes reality in history," the pope said. "Let us work for peace by weaving and mending, not by cutting and tearing. Let us follow Jesus, and in following him, let us walk together on the path to peace."

After decades of tumult, the Christian residents of South Sudan broke away from the Muslim-majority nation of Sudan, declaring independence in 2011. The new country quickly became engulfed in a bloody civil war among its more than 60 ethnic groups.

Over the last decade, the country's Christian leaders have been repeatedly praised for transcending the conflict in an effort to keep the peace, though tensions stemming from ethnic divides have begun to emerge, fracturing their historically strong alliance.

While Catholics represent the majority of South Sudan's Christian population, they are represented by only 7 bishops, compared to some 61 Anglican bishops throughout the vast nation, all of whom have historically coordinated well together to ensure the new country's fragile peace.

The fact that South Sudan's president Salva Kiir is Catholic and his major political rival, Riek Machar, is Presbyterian (or Church of Scotland), only underscores the need for unity among Christians if the country's political leaders are going to peacefully coexist, according to a number of frontline workers in the country.

People participate in an ecumenical prayer service attended by Pope Francis at the John Gara

People participate in an ecumenical prayer service attended by Pope Francis at the John Garang Mausoleum in Juba, South Sudan, Feb. 4. (CNS/Paul Haring)

Ahead of the trip, Maryknoll lay missioner Gabe Hurrish told NCR that the South Sudanese people need to see the example of the country's religious leaders overcoming the divisions that have wracked the rest of the nation.

"The leaders of this poor ravaged country have let down their people," said Hurrish, who works in the Kuron Peace Village on the southeast border of South Sudan. "We pray for these leaders as they are losing their souls."

Religious leaders, he said, by contrast, can witness to the fact that it is a Christian duty to live in harmony, whether at the grassroots level or among the country's political class.

Francis echoed that sentiment during his remarks at the prayer service, pleading that "the tribalism and the partisan spirit that fuel acts of violence in this country not impair relationships between the various confessions."

"On the contrary," he continued, "may the witness of unity among believers overflow to the people as a whole."

Pope Francis greets an internally displaced young woman during a meeting with internally dis

Pope Francis greets an internally displaced young woman during a meeting with internally displaced people at Freedom Hall in Juba, South Sudan, Feb. 4. Also pictured are Rev. Iain Greenshields, left, moderator of the Presbyterian Church of Scotland, and Anglican Archbishop Justin Welby, right. (CNS/Paul Haring)

'The future cannot lie in refugee camps'

Before the ecumenical prayer service, the Christian leaders met with some 2,000 internally displaced people from all corners of the country, many of whom have lived in refugee camps for 10 years.

More than 4.3 million people in South Sudan are estimated to need humanitarian assistance — the majority of whom are displaced or refugees.

"Great numbers of children born in recent years have known only the reality of camps for displaced persons," said Francis. "They have no memory of what it means to have a home; they are losing their connection with their native land, their roots and their traditions."

Despite this grim history, Francis told them to look ahead to a different, brighter tomorrow.

"The future cannot lie in refugee camps," he said.

As a sign of their shared commitment to the country, Francis, Welby and Greenshields concluded the gathering with a joint benediction over the country's displaced persons, blessing to victims of the worst refugee crisis on the African continent.

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Precious Blood Sr. Mumbi Kigutha, president of Friends in Solidarity with South Sudan, an organization representing more than 400 religious congregations with an aim of responding to the immediate needs of the country, praised the way the three ecumenical leaders elevated the role of the country's young people, women and civil society leaders as essential to working alongside political and religious leaders in securing the country's future during the second day of the high-profile visit.

"In a country as young as South Sudan, where the church has had a huge role in building up the country, there's a danger of falling into clerical or patriarchal patterns," she told NCR. "The country is so vast and the religious cannot do everything."

Committing to training young leaders while the country is still in its infancy, Kigutha said, will help South Sudan avoid "the patterns we've seen so many African countries where the power, the privilege and the decision-making lie at the hands of the few, but lies in the hands of the people."

Participants wait for Pope Francis' arrival for a meeting with bishops, priests, religious and se

Participants wait for Pope Francis' arrival for a meeting with bishops, priests, religious and seminarians in St. Theresa Cathedral in Juba, South Sudan, Feb. 4. (CNS/Paul Haring)

Pope to clergy: Get your hands dirty

Pope Francis began his first full morning here by meeting with South Sudan's bishops, priests and religious men and women in Juba's St. Theresa Cathedral, where he encouraged them to remain committed to ministries of service and to avoid the temptation of seeing themselves as above their flock.

"We are not tribal chieftains, but compassionate and merciful shepherds; not overlords, but servants who stoop to wash the feet of our brothers and sisters," said the pope. "Not a worldly agency that administers earthly goods, but the community of God's children."

Nuns react as Pope Francis arrives for a meeting with bishops, priests, religious and seminaria

Nuns react as Pope Francis arrives for a meeting with bishops, priests, religious and seminarians in St. Theresa Cathedral in Juba, South Sudan, Feb. 4, 2023. (CNS/Paul Haring)

The pope encouraged them to be willing to get their hands dirty for the people they serve, including speaking out against injustice and violence.

"We must never exercise our ministry by chasing after religious or social prestige, but rather by walking in the midst of and alongside our people, learning to listen and to dialogue, cooperating as ministers with one another and with the laity," said the pope.

During his final day here, Sunday, Feb. 5, Francis will celebrate a Mass expected to draw some of the largest crowds in the country's history before he returns to Rome.

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