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Pope Francis greets the crowd as he arrives to celebrate Mass at the John Garang Mausoleum in Juba, South Sudan, Feb. 5, 2023. (CNS/Paul Haring)



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ON BOARD THE PAPAL PLANE FROM SOUTH SUDAN — February 5, 2023

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Pope Francis on Feb. 5 said the recent death of retired Pope Benedict XVI has been "instrumentalized" by those in the Catholic Church seeking to score points against the current papacy and using the late pope's death to serve their own agendas.

"Those people are without ethics," said Francis en route back to Rome following his first international trip after the Dec. 31 death of the late pope emeritus. "They are people who belong to a party, not to the church."

While Francis didn't name names, over the last month a number of vocal critics of Francis' pastoral priorities — including Benedict's longtime personal secretary, Archbishop Georg Ganswein — have given interviews and published books claiming that in retirement, Benedict was embittered by certain decisions taken by Francis.

Francis dismissed those reports as fabricated and said that such individuals were serving their own agenda, using a colloquial Italian expression for those seeking to divert a community's water supply solely for their own purposes.

Just days after Benedict's death, Ganswein published a tell-all memoir claiming that the retired pope was heartbroken by Francis' 2021 decision to restrict the celebration of the Latin Mass and was at odds with Francis' 2016 apostolic exhortation, Amoris Laetitia, which offered a cautious opening to Communion for divorced and remarried Catholics. One week later, following the unexpected death of Australian Cardinal George Pell, a long-time ally of Benedict, it was revealed that Pell had been the author of an anonymous March 2022 memo labeling the Francis papacy a "disaster" and out-of-sync with the papacies of Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI.

Francis, however, told reporters on the plane that he consulted regularly with Benedict and that the two were on the same page. He went on to share an anecdote of an unnamed theologian who went to Benedict with a complaint over Francis' support for civil unions. Francis said that Benedict tapped several noted theologian-cardinals to examine the complaint.

"They explained it, and so the story ended," said Francis, adding that Benedict was not saddened by decisions he had taken over the last 10 years as pope.

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The pope's remarks came at the end of his six-day African visit to the Democratic Republic of Congo and South Sudan, where he was joined by the Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby and Moderator of the Church of Scotland Iain Greenshields. All three church leaders traveled to the South Sudanese capital of Juba Feb. 3-5 as part of a grand effort to shore up the war-ravaged country's delicate peace process.

During a first-of-its-kind, on-board joint press conference, the leaders of the three Christian churches reiterated their shared desire for an end to violence in South Sudan, but also offered a rare and united front among the three major Christian leaders against condemning LGBTQ persons, with all three strongly voicing their opposition to the criminalization of homosexuality.

Francis repeated his remarks from a high-profile Jan. 25 interview in which he backed the decriminalization of homosexuality, saying that Catholic leaders should work for the repeal of such "unjust" laws, including in Africa.

"People with homosexual tendencies are children of God," said Francis when asked his reaction to families, including those in Congo and South Sudan, who ostracize their LGBTQ family members, often citing their Christian faith to support their position.

"God is walking with them," the pope added. "To condemn someone like this is a sin."

Despite significant differences among the three churches on homosexuality, all three offered a forceful defense of gay persons.

Greenshields, whose churches offers gay blessings, said that "nowhere in my reading of the four gospels do I see Jesus turning anyone away."

Welby said he heartily agreed with the pope's words, adding that the Church of England had twice passed resolutions supporting the decriminalization of homosexuality, but added that, regretfully, they had not changed many people's minds.

The archbishop's remarks come ahead of a closely-watched meeting later this week where Anglican leaders will discuss the recent controversial announcement by the country's bishops' that they would not back same-sex marriage but would approve the blessing of civil unions.

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Reflecting back on the first stop of his visit in the Congo — a nation with rich mineral resources, yet some of the worst poverty rates in the world — Francis repeated his condemnation of nations that exploit and plunder Congo's minerals, taking advantage of its near-permanent state of instability and fueling war among the country's more than 100 armed rebel groups.

Francis said the trafficking in arms was the "biggest plague" and that he was once told that if arms sales ended, it would bring a quick end to the world's famines.

Welby echoed the pope's sentiments, saying that Congo should not be "the playground of the great powers." In recent years, superpowers like China, Russia and the United States have been in fierce competition over Congo's underground treasures, such as cobalt, lithium and copper, in a race to transition towards green energy.

Considering its vast natural resources, Welby said Congo "should be one of the richest countries on the planet," and be able to provide aid to the rest of Africa.

When asked what his message might be to Russia's President Vladimir Putin on the eve of the one-year anniversary of his country's Feb. 24 invasion of Ukraine, the pope again stressed the importance of dialogue and said he remained open to meeting with Putin and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky.

Welby, who visited Ukraine in late November, offered a blunter assessment, saying that ending the war is "in the hands of President Putin."

Both church leaders emphasized the need to not to forget other raging conflicts in the world — including Myanmar, Somalia, Nigeria and, of course, South Sudan.

Prior to leaving South Sudan on Sunday, Feb. 5, Francis celebrated Mass for an estimated 100,000 participants, telling them that Christians can "make a decisive contribution to changing history" if they overcome their chronic divisions and stop "pitting tribes and ethnic groups against one another."

The pope encouraged the large crowd to be people "capable of building good human relationships as a way of curbing the corruption of evil, the disease of division, the filth of fraudulent business dealings and the plague of injustice."

En route back to Rome, the 86-year-old Francis, who continues to struggle with mobility issues, said that despite a bothersome knee, he has no plans to slow down on papal travel.

The pope told reporters that plans are in the works for a trip to Marseilles, France at the end of September, where Francis has been invited to address a meeting of bishops and mayors from the Mediterranean. Directly following that meeting, Francis said he may travel onward to Mongolia to visit the country's tiny Catholic population.

Francis also confirmed he plans to attend World Youth Day in Lisbon, Portugal, in August and said he would like to visit India in 2024.

When asked if they would be willing to undertake another voyage with Francis, both the Archbishop of Canterbury and the moderator said they would be delighted to do so if the pope deemed it useful.

Greenshields, however, noted that the term of the moderator is only for one year, after which, he said, "a very capable woman will be taking over," Sally Foster Fulton. The moderator's reply was met with applause by some on board the pope's plane traveling with its nearly all-male Vatican entourage.

"Certainly this is the best airline I've ever flown on," quipped Welby

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