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Jesuit Father Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator, the dean of the Jesuit School of Theology of California-based Santa Clara University, is pictured in an undated photo. He is the recipient of "The Hubert Walter Award for Reconciliation and Interfaith Cooperation" by the archbishop of Canterbury for his "outstanding contribution to ecumenical work." Announced Nov. 25, 2024, the award honors "his leadership of a 2019 retreat for politicians on opposing sides in South Sudan's civil war." (OSV News/courtesy Father Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator)

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His efforts resulted in a retreat that ended with Pope Francis kissing the feet of warring South Sudan leaders — a gesture that shocked the world in 2019. Now the Jesuit priest has received a prestigious peace award for his groundbreaking work.

Jesuit Father Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator, the dean of the Jesuit School of Theology of California-based Santa Clara University, has been awarded "The Hubert Walter Award for Reconciliation and Interfaith Cooperation" by the archbishop of Canterbury for his "outstanding contribution to ecumenical work," honoring "his leadership of a 2019 retreat for politicians on opposing sides in South Sudan's civil war."

In an interview with OSV News, the Jesuit priest said that "the retreat was a one-day event designed to invite the warring political leaders into a space of shared prayer, ... dialogue and reconciliation."

"We were attempting to open the hearts of the political leaders to the actions of the Holy Spirit. I believe the experience helped to move them closer to the possibility of a peaceful and reconciled South Sudan," he told OSV News.

On April 12, 2019, Francis repeatedly knelt and kissed the feet of South Sudan's political leaders at the end of a spiritual retreat at the Vatican.

The action has resounded across Africa, with ordinary South Sudanese citizens, clerics, politicians and civil society groups celebrating it as a major boost for the fragile peace in the world's newest nation. South Sudan descended into a civil war in December 2013 following a political dispute between President Salva Kiir and Vice President Riek Machar.

At the time of the retreat, the leaders were struggling to form a transitional government at a pivotal period after six years of civil war.

The Hubert Walter Award was first awarded in March 2016 by Archbishop Justin Welby, who recently resigned as the archbishop of Canterbury. It is named after Hubert Walter, the archbishop of Canterbury from 1193 to 1205, who had dialogue with non-Christians at a time of interfaith conflict. The award for Orobator was announced on Nov. 25.

"The Jesuits have dedicated many years of apostolic work to the service of the people of Sudan and South Sudan," Orobator told OSV News.

Working in various parts of the country "In one sense we were ministering to victims of the protracted and violent civil war in the country," therefore "the invitation to engage in this kind of work of reconciliation and interfaith cooperation was an opportunity for us ... Jesuits, to contribute to a structural change that could positively impact the lives of ordinary South Sudanese," who have had to "bear the brunt of this senseless and devastating conflict for such a long time."

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The groundbreaking retreat Orobator helped facilitate was the idea of both Francis and Welby.

"As they saw it, it was a novel way of working for reconciliation, justice, and peace. Besides the political leaders, all the major churches in South Sudan were represented," the Jesuit priest said.

During the retreat, "there were moments of reflection on scriptural texts and on the national anthem of South Sudan, which is in fact a prayer," he said of the structure of the Vatican meeting. "The participants spent time alone in prayer in the chapel and reconvened to share the fruits of their reflection. They had moments of devotion and singing. The entire focus was on building mutual trust," Orobator said.

"We were attempting to open the hearts of the political leaders to the actions of the Holy Spirit. I believe the experience helped to move them closer to the possibility of a peaceful and reconciled South Sudan."

Today, peaceful coexistence in South Sudan"is a long and difficult process," the priest said.

"Many promises have been made and broken. The outcomes are not promising. The current situation may best be described as a stalemate. It takes courage and self-sacrifice, the ability to see beyond one's own narrow interest or agenda, to make real and lasting peace. These virtues are perhaps in short supply right now," he noted.

The Jesuit priest told OSV News he accepted the Anglican award "to draw attention to the sad situation in South Sudan. The conflict in the country has largely been forgotten," he said.

Hopefully, he said, "this award will remind us of the crying need for reconciliation, justice and peace" and "awaken the conscience of the international community and the country’s political leaders to their obligation toward the people of South Sudan. They have suffered enough and the situation needs to be resolved once and for all so that the people can live in peace and dignity."

He added that "the Gospel calls us to be artisans and architects of peace" and that promoting peace "is an integral part of who we are, what we believe as Christians, and our mission as People of God."

Violence, endemic poverty and natural disasters have haunted South Sudan — the youngest and one of the poorest countries in the world — since gaining independence from Sudan in 2011.

More than 850,000 people have crossed from Sudan into South Sudan over the past 18 months, according to Doctors Without Borders, due to war in neighboring Sudan that broke out in April 2023.