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Cardinal Napier: Sudan's church must 'walk with,' 'guide' politicians

by Christina S.N. Lewis

JUBA, SUDAN -- As people across Sudan prepare for tomorrow's historic vote, which will determine whether the southern half of the country splits from the north, South African Cardinal Wilfrid Fox Napier arrived here Jan. 8 as a sign of "solidarity from the church in South Africa."

NCR's Christina Lewis, who is in Sudan following the vote as part of a weeks long reporting assignment to the continent, spoke with Napier Jan. 8. Following is the complete, unedited transcript of their conversation.

***NCR:* What do you hope to achieve by coming here?**

Napier: The message of solidarity from the church in South Africa. I think that we want to share also some of the experiences that we've had, positive ones and the negative ones, with the bishops, but also with other people in Sudan. What are the things that you can hope will go well and what are the things that you have to be careful about not going so well.

What mistake do you think South Africa made, that you would advise the Sudanese not to make?

One of the biggest mistakes we made as a church in South Africa was to withdraw from the process too early. To withdraw and say the people's elected representatives are now in parliament, we've worked with them for the liberation of South Africa and now let's leave it to them to develop the country forward. I think what we needed to do was to be there walking with them and constantly guiding them to keep the model principles of justice and right and equity in sight all the time. I think that was one of the mistakes we made.

Secondly, when it came to one of the success stories of South Africa, the truth and reconciliation commission. The truth part of it was dealt with very well--the [uh] full disclosure of the atrocities that had been committed. That was dealt with very well.

Where there was a big mistake made was, I think, in leaving reconciliation to happen almost as if it would do it on its own without having a positive input in order to bring about reconciliation. I think also the idea of reconciliation being limited to amnesty, to being forgiveness without restitution, without justice in other words, was also a weakness in what was done in the TRC, the truth and reconciliation commission.

I think if Sudan is going to have something similar to build up the spirit of reconciliation between the two parties they would have to look at the justice side as well and the restitution side.

I am mixed race. And I understand that you are also mixed race? How has being mixed race affected your philosophy and the way you act in terms of dealing with people who have a historical tension between them?

I think that I was particularly gifted. I did my studies in Ireland. Therefore I had the experience of being in a context completely foreign to me in a white country, in a white community. It was within a few months of being in Ireland that I realized that there is no such thing as one racial group being superior to another. There's differences? And if you have? because a person is different doesn't mean they are inferior or superior. And when I realized that I came to understand that we have to work out a way of dealing with people as equals and not as white or black or whatever.

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And then I returned and I was ordained as a priest and I went into a parish where the majority of the people were black. And as a result of that one would expect that the black would be seen as inferior to the colored. The mixed race ones would be a above the blacks.

And once again, my first encounter with the community was when one of the black women stood up and said, here at last we have got one of our own sons coming as a priest to serve us. And that had such an impact on me and that I did exactly as I had done in Ireland and I said from now on no one is inferior or superior. They're different. They're different customs different cultures but from now on you deal with people on that same level. And that has stood me in good stead in some of the arenas where I had to go in as a representative of our bishop's conference to mediate between the different political parties and dealing with people as at that level and not worrying about whether they are white or black or any other color.

For me that has been the advantage of being mixed race is that you could feel for both sides and able to deal fairly with both sides as well.

Do you have any advice for the local priests who are here in Sudan who are dealing with these issues of tension within their congregations?

I think one is to keep positive. To keep positive in the sense that you've got to hold up the value of human life, the dignity of the human person and this is something that nobody should lose sight of is that We've all been given the same dignity because we are all in the image of god and therefore that must be the basis of our relationships with eachother. I think that would be my thing. Don't look at a person as a southerner

or a northerner or whatever their state of origin is. But look at them as persons who have this intrinsic value in them.

Thank you.

You're welcome.

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