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Apostolic Journey of His Holiness Francis in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and in South Sudan (Ecumenical Pilgrimage of Peace in South Sudan) (31 January to 5 February 2023) – Ecumenical Prayer at the “John Garang” Mausoleum

Ecumenical Prayer at the “John Garang” Mausoleum

This afternoon, at the “John Garang” Mausoleum in Juba, the ecumenical prayer meeting took place.

After the liturgical greeting and a brief introduction from the Reverend Thomas Tut Puot Mut, President of the South Sudan Council of Churches (SSCC), the Penitential Act was performed, followed by the oration, the first reading and the reading from the Gospel.

Then, after the allocution of the Archbishop of Canterbury, His Grace Justin Welby, and the introduction from the Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, Pastor Iain Greenshields, the Symbol of the Apostles was recited. This was followed by the prayer of intercession and mercy for the nation, during the course of which each reader poured water on the trees planted previously as an act of unity.

The Holy Father Francis delivered his address, which was followed by the recitation of the *Pater Noster*, the blessing of the three religious leaders, and the final hymn. According to the local authorities, more than 50,000 faithful participated in the ecumenical prayer at the “John Garang” Mausoleum.

At the end, the Pope returned by car to the apostolic nunciature, where he dined privately.

The following is the address delivered by the Holy Father during the ecumenical prayer:

Address of the Holy Father

Mr President,

Distinguished Religious and Civil Authorities,
Dear Brothers and Sisters,

From this beloved land, wracked by violence, many prayers have now been raised to heaven. Many different voices have united to form a single voice. Together, as God's holy people, we have prayed for this people and its suffering. As Christians, prayer is the first and most important thing we are called to do in order to work for the good and to find the strength needed to persevere on our journey. *To pray, to work and to journey*: let us reflect on these three verbs.

First, *to pray*. The great commitment of Christian communities to human development, solidarity and peace would be fruitless without prayer. Indeed, we cannot promote peace without first invoking Jesus the "Prince of Peace" (*Is 9:5*). Whatever we do for others and share with them is above all a freely given gift that we, in our emptyhandedness, have received from him: it is grace, pure grace. We are Christians because we have been freely loved by Jesus Christ.

This morning, I spoke of the figure of Moses, and now, precisely in connection with prayer, I would like to recall an event that was decisive for him and for his people. It occurred when he had already begun to lead the people to freedom. When they reached the shores of the Red Sea, Moses and all the Israelites found themselves at a dramatic impasse. Before them, they saw an impassable wall of water; behind them, the enemy force was closing in on them with chariots and horses. Does that not perhaps remind us of the early days of this country, caught between the waters of death, the disastrous floods that hit the country, and the brutal violence of war? Yet in that desperate situation, Moses told the people: "Fear not, stand firm, and you will see the salvation of the Lord" (*Ex 14:13*). I ask myself, where did Moses find this kind of certainty amid the constant fears and laments of his people? That strength came to him from listening to the Lord (cf. vv. 2-4), who had promised him that he was about to manifest his glory. Union with God, trust in him, cultivated by prayer: this was the secret of the strength that enabled Moses to lead the people from oppression to freedom.

The same holds true for us. Prayer gives us the strength to go forward, to overcome our fears, to glimpse, even in the darkness, the salvation that God is even now preparing. Moreover, prayer brings down God's salvation upon the people. The prayer of intercession that marked the life of Moses (cf. *Ex 32:11-14*) is the type of prayer that we, as shepherds of God's holy people, are especially called to practise. Prayer for the Lord of peace to intervene where men and women are powerless to bring about peace: a tenacious and constant prayer of intercession. Dear brothers and sisters, let us support one another in this effort. In the diversity of our confessions, let us feel united among ourselves, as one family, responsible to pray for everyone. In our parishes, our churches, our places of praise and worship, let us pray constantly (cf. *Acts 1:14*) that South Sudan, like the people of God in the Scriptures, "may come to the promised land". Let us pray that, in a spirit of serenity, equitable provisions will be made for the use of its rich and fertile land and that the country will be crowned with the promised peace that, sadly, has yet to come.

It is precisely for peace that we are called *to work*. Jesus wants us to be peacemakers (cf. *Mt 5:9*). He wants his Church to be not only a sign and instrument of intimate union with God but also of the unity of the entire human family (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 1). Indeed, as Saint Paul tells us, Christ "is our peace" precisely because he restores unity. It is he who "made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us" (cf. *Eph 2:14*). That is what the peace of God is: not only a truce amid conflicts, but a fraternal fellowship that comes from uniting and not absorbing; from pardoning and not overpowering; from reconciling and not imposing. So great is heaven's desire for peace that it was proclaimed from the very moment of Christ's birth: "on earth peace among those whom he favours" (*Lk 2:14*). So great was Jesus' anguish over the refusal of this gift that he had come to bring, that he wept for Jerusalem, saying, "If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace!" (*Lk 19:42*).

Let us work tirelessly, dear brothers and sisters, for the peace that the Spirit of Jesus and the Father urges us to build: a peace that integrates diversity and promotes unity in plurality. The peace of the Holy Spirit harmonizes differences, whereas the spirit hostile to God and humanity uses diversity as a means of division. Scripture tells us that "the children of God and the children of the devil are revealed in this way: all who do not do what is right

are not from God, nor are those who do not love their brothers and sisters” (1 Jn 3:10). Dear friends, those who would call themselves Christians must choose which side to take. Those who choose Christ choose peace, always; those who unleash war and violence betray the Lord and deny his Gospel. 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 love of Christians is not only for those close to us, but for everyone, for in Jesus each person is our neighbour, our brother or sister – even our enemies (cf. Mt 5: 38-48). How much more true is this of those who are members of the same people, albeit belonging to different ethnic groups. “That you love one another as I have loved you” (Jn 15:12): that is Jesus’ commandment, and it contradicts every “tribal” understanding of religion. “That they may all be one” (Jn 17:21). That is Jesus’ heartfelt prayer to the Father for all of us who believe.

Let us work together, brothers and sisters, to foster this fraternal unity among ourselves as Christians, and help to bring the message of peace to society by spreading Jesus’ way of non-violence. Those who claim to be believers should have nothing more to do with a culture based on the spirit of vengeance. The Gospel must not be just a beautiful religious philosophy, but a prophecy that becomes reality in history. Let us work for peace by weaving and mending, not by cutting or tearing. Let us follow Jesus, and in following him, let us walk together on the path to peace (cf. Lk 1:79).

After the verbs to pray and to work, we come now to the third verb: *to journey*. In this country, Christian communities have been deeply committed to promoting processes of reconciliation. I thank you for this radiant testimony of faith born of the realization, expressed not only in words but also in deeds, that prior to any historical divisions there remains one unchanging fact, namely, that we are Christians; we belong to Christ. It is a beautiful thing that, amid situations of great conflict, those who profess the Christian faith have never fragmented the people but have been, and continue to be, a factor of unity. This ecumenical tradition of South Sudan is a precious treasure, an act of praise for the name of Jesus and an act of love for the Church his bride, an example to all for the advancement of Christian unity. It is a tradition to be cultivated in that same spirit. The ecclesial divisions of past centuries should not have any impact on those who are being evangelized, and the spread of the Gospel ought to contribute to the growth of greater unity. May the tribalism and the partisan spirit that fuel acts of violence in this country not impair relationships between the various confessions. On the contrary, may the witness of unity among believers overflow to the people as a whole.

Here, to conclude, I would like to suggest two key words to help us persevere in our journey: *memory* and *commitment*. *Memory*. The steps that you take follow in the footsteps of those who have gone before you. Do not fear that you will not live up to their example, but feel yourselves urged on by those who prepared the way for you. As in a relay race, take hold of their testimony and hold it tight as you run towards the goal of full and visible communion. Then, *commitment*. We journey towards unity when love is concrete, when we join in coming to the aid of the outcast, the wounded and the disenfranchised. You already do this in any number of areas. I think in particular of the sectors of healthcare, education and charitable outreach. How much greatly needed assistance you provide to the people! Thank you for this. Continue to assist them, never acting as competitors but as members of a family, brothers and sisters who, by their compassion for the suffering, the beloved of Jesus, give glory to God and bear witness to the fellowship he loves.

Dear friends, my brothers and I have come, together, as pilgrims to be with you, the holy people of God, on your journey. Even if distance separates us physically, we always remain close to you. Let us set out each day by praying for one another, by working together as witnesses and mediators of the peace of Jesus, and by persevering in the same journey by our practical acts of charity and unity. In all things, let us love one another constantly and from the heart (cf. 1 Pet 1:22).
