

# A Kiss for Peace

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On April 10th and 11th, a spiritual retreat took place at “Casa Santa Marta” (Vatican) with the South Sudanese leaders Salva Kiir and Riek Machar, who are the central figures of the conflict in South Sudan. This retreat was an initiative of the Archbishop of Canterbury, Monsignor Justin Welby, and was attended by the previous moderator of the Presbyterian Church of Scotland, the Reverend John Chalmers. The retreat concluded with the presence of Pope Francis who called for peace in a way that has been noted around the world: he knelt and kissed the feet of the leaders responsible for the conflict, one by one and without exception. That was all: no theatrics, no gesturing, no staging. The Pope emanated simplicity, humility, and commitment.

## A prophetic gesture

Some gestures speak for themselves and in the bible, we find many symbolic scenes that seek to attract the attention of the audience. The prophetic nature of the people of Israel, which Jesus of Nazareth takes part in, is a clear example of this. We can also see this gesture of Pope Francis as part of this tradition and understand it through experience of the Passover which revealed the inexhaustible mystery of Jesus as the embodiment of human suffering. In this case, He is represented in the suffering of the people of South Sudan as consequence of the war that began in 2013.

According to the report from the UN Office for the Coordination of Humani-

tarian Affairs (OCHA) released in March of 2019, there are currently 7.1 million people in need of humanitarian aid, of which 6,450,000 (57% of the total population) face serious food insecurity. A large part of the population is at serious risk of malnutrition because of this conflict. This gesture from Francis is a prophetic sign that denounces the current state of violence and the injustice it produces, imploring the leaders to end this war in the name of God.

It is also a gesture inspired by Gandhi who, similarly, asked the European leaders during the Second World War to cease the violence. Mahatma prepared his gestures through retreats and fasts, entering into deep meditation before undertaking a nonviolent action – seen here in the sense of prayer throughout the retreat. At the same time, this is a deeply spiritual gesture because the only true Prophets are those who speak from a *mystical* experience of life (meaning “THE mystery”); The mystery that open one to the Absolute truth (God) and to others (the “neighbor” who so essential in the Christian tradition and doctrine). For the Christian, this experience is always linked to prayer which is, fundamentally, a personal encounter with Jesus who also prayed tirelessly, especially in the key moments of his life, before major actions of his prophetic mission, and whose spirit continues to pray in us.

### **A gesture that brings hope**

Beyond the large scale and structural dimension of the conflict, the pope’s gesture also brings light and hope to the people who suffer in this humanitarian drama. The many children who, apart from being direct victims of the war, have also been

forced to be soldiers and have been traumatized, as we have learned through the heartbreaking accounts of those who have been freed. Women, who are never exempt from this type of violence, are often at the center of this war. Yet they continue to demonstrate their resilience and ability to respond constructively, and to raise their families in these tragic situations. For example, Hanna Nyarure, a victim of the conflict and matriarch of her family who was abandoned by her husband, runs a four-hour journey to get food for her children, despite the risk of being mugged along the way. The mere fact that women play this stabilizing role in the family provides a sense of hope in the communities that are affected by this violence, and yet it continues to go unnoticed.

For these communities and the people who suffer in them, Francis directed the following words to the South Sudanese Leaders: “The sight of God is directed especially toward you. It is a look that offers peace. But there are others who look to you: your community, and it expresses its burning desire for justice, reconciliation and peace.”<sup>1</sup> All of this is a sign that the victims are not alone.

### **A Christian gesture of nonviolence**

Through the retreat, his kissing of their feet, and the preceding address, Pope Francis sought to stir in those present their responsibility for the human suffering derived from the conflict. His hope was to achieve what Gene Sharp calls the first mechanism of change in the nonviolent struggle and, at the same time, the hardest one: *conversion*. The kiss to the feet of these leaders is different from those the Pope had previously given to many needy people. While for the mar-

ginalized persons, this kiss can be interpreted as a sign that they are not alone and God is with them, in the case of the South Sudanese leaders it is a clear call to be transformed into servants of peace for a people who cry out for the end of the current war.

However, the kiss is also part of a wider action. Riek Machar, the leader of the opposition, acknowledged that the mediation of the Pope facilitated his participation in this retreat along with Kiir and has also given a boost to the peace efforts in South Sudan. This may perhaps be the start to a new of policy between the groups involved.

In fact, the pope has repeatedly reiterated the great truth that politics is a fundamental vehicle for guaranteeing people's dignity. Seeking the common good should be the goal for all politicians of any ideology, cultural, and religious backgrounds who wish to work together for the good of the entire human family. Good politics practices justice, fairness, mutual respect, truth, and fidelity. It should work for peace, respect and promote the dignity of all people, and guarantee human rights for them all, and do all of this equally. At the end of the day, we are all stewards of each other.

### **A transformative gesture**

The Pope's gesture is a powerful challenge for current human thought and its transformation. It even touched the vice president of South Sudan, Rebecca Nyandeng Garang, who acknowledged that "I had never seen anything like it. It brought tears to my eyes." In fact, this is about heading towards a transformative experience, which implies that it is inevitably surprising and clearly unexpected.

Pope Francis shocks those present with the depth of his humility and exposes immense love. The pontiff performs an extreme act that shows resounding commitment and invites those present to partake in diaphanous service: To work for peace, even in the face of the difficulties and may arise.

The prayer meeting we discussed was not merely a protocol act, nor an isolated act, nor is the pope alone in his work for peace. The Council of the Churches of South Sudan, representing the local Christian churches has visited Rome to talk with the community of Sant'Egidio, which, in turn, has expressed its willingness to help in the country's peace process. The hope is this the Catholic community can facilitate the path to reconciliation through several initiatives which will be launched soon. These two groups are also important actors in facilitating the peace process. The work of fraternity for peace is project built in community, unity, and coordination.

### **A gesture of love and fraternity**

As followers of Jesus, the gesture of Pope Francisco should profoundly challenge us since it refers to the great Christian truth that the God in whom we believe is on His knees, is at our feet and, since He serves us, we should serve each other with the same love. A few weeks ago, on Holy Thursday, we remembered the gesture of Jesus washing His disciples' feet at the Last Supper before His passion and death (Jn 13.1-17). With this gesture, He demonstrates and proves His profound love and commitment to them. Jesus, assuming the work of a slave, rejects the priorities of this world and situates us all as equals. In the face of this unheard-of

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idea, the disciples are uncomfortable. Peter does not want Jesus to wash his feet, but the Lord insists: one must allow yourself to be served in order to follow Him and, thus, learn what true service is. We are invited to do the same as our Master, who is among us as the “one who serves” (Lk 22.27), because being one with Jesus means taking part in the love that is given through Him. But we must do so humbly because our encounter with Jesus is the start of a process of conversion that will change our hearts, perspectives, and lead each of us to be active agents of peace and social justice.

We need committed people to improve our world, making a more fraternal place. That is how we can make it more human. For us Christians, fraternity is the fruit of Passover (Rom 6.3; Col 3.11). We are brought together in Christ through our baptism in which, we believe, the goal is to let Him act in us and through us; to let ourselves be transformed by His spirit. Still, He needs our collaboration to continue His mission, as the pope’s message to the World Peace Day this year reminds us: We exist to prolong His incarnation, being a new Christ every day.

## **Artisans of peace**

The pope insists that there can be no real commitment to the common good or social justice without fraternity. If fraternity is missing, there are only groups of individuals motivated by their own interests, with no common ideals. Only fraternity

can guarantee a true peace. In this message, which is an invitation for each of us to contribute our own stone to the construction of our Communal Home, Pope Francis also reminds us, in particular, that we should be messengers of peace and reconciliation. We are invited to give and bring peace on three levels: with ourselves, with each other, and with creation. This is a peace that we cannot transmit if we are not at peace ourselves. Hence the construction of peace is shown to us as a gift to be welcomed which then becomes our daily task. We must be artisans of peace, helping to create bridges through dialogue, always being aware of human fragility. Building peace is the fruit of giving testimony in action, of living it personally. The pope leading a remarkable pacifistic pontificate, so he asks the faithful to pray for him, which is to say; pray for his governance, and, also, help him in his ministry (meaning “service”). Praying for the pope, which is all he consistently asks for, is to be in communion with his commitment to conversion, his efforts for peace and his testimony of love. Our pontiff seeks to amplify what he receives and disseminate it, though his large public image, to all Christians and among all people of goodwill in the whole world. And he hopes to do the same with his message of peace.

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1. Pope Francis ‘ speech to the leaders of South Sudan Rome, April 11, 2019.