

The Pope in South Sudan

Sr Orla Tracey of the Loreto Congregation founded a school for girls in Rumbek, South Sudan. She reports on the visit of Pope Francis to South Sudan.

The Pope had been planning a visit to South Sudan for years. There were postponements due to insecurity in the country, Covid-19 and his health. Finally, in February 2023 the Pope came to visit. This journey was historic for a number of reasons: it was the first time a pope visited South Sudan, the first time a pope visited with other Christian leaders – in this case Archbishop Justin Welby and the Moderator of the Church of Scotland – and led an ecumenical meeting.

South Sudan is generally famous for all the wrong reasons: with high rates of illiteracy, high infant mortality and high rates of early and forced marriage. It is ranked in the top ten when it comes to the most dangerous countries. With a population of approximately 11 million, 1.6 million people today are internally displaced, and over two thirds of the population are food dependent. The country has spent

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most of the past fifty years fighting, first with those of the north of the country and more recently among themselves in the newly created South Sudan.

The Pope and Church leaders had been anxious to make this visit to South Sudan for a number of years. In 2019 Pope Francis invited our political leaders, presidents and vice presidents (we have five!), to Rome for peace talks, which were hosted by the San Egidio community. It was during this meeting that the Pope famously got down on his hands and knees and kissed the feet of our political leaders, begging them to work for peace. Now the Pope and Church leaders were coming to South Sudan to follow up on that visit. The theme of their visit was appropriately named ‘that all may be one’, the motto taken from John 17 reminds us all of the need for unity in a fractured world and a country such as South Sudan. As we waited for the Pope’s visit our biggest challenge was how to travel to Juba, our capital city, 410 kilometre from our home in Rumbek. The roads are often dangerous and difficult. Many discussions took place with our young people and finally we decided to walk, and to call young people from the different parishes and areas of our diocese to lead a peace walk to Juba. We would walk for nine days and have three additional days in Juba with the Pope.



Meeting with the Pope, Juba, South Sudan.

We had four pillars to our pilgrimage: a walk, an experience of community, a witness of peace and a prayer experience.

We aimed to walk for five hours each morning. We started when the sun rose, usually at 6.30am and finished, where possible, by noon. Temperatures were between thirty and forty degrees. We carried water as sources of water were scarce along the way. We danced, sang, told stories, riddles and jokes to pass the time. We passed along roads, impassible some years earlier due to raping, robberies and murder. We marvelled at the beauty of the country and the potential for peace. We were welcomed in each village by the people. Students in schools walked with us, women's groups often walked for hours with us.

Old men amazed that people could walk to the capital, asked if we were crazy. The reality is that people only walk long distances in South Sudan when they are fleeing violence.

Our second pillar was peace. This was an important part of our journey. South Sudan has had so many years of violence with communities and tribes set against one another. The very fact that people from different tribes, young men and young women, could walk and live together was already a wonderful example of peace. They wanted to extend that hope to the communities they visited and each evening before the sun was set they shared a drama on peace. This provided a lot of laughter and discussion as to how peace can build community. The youth group themselves were a beautiful



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example of building peace.

Community living was our third pillar: we had a group of sixty young men and women. Most had never left their home town and few had ever been to Juba. The nine days of walking and three days in Juba were spent as a community. We slept in classrooms and chapels, we collected water from rivers and wells, and cooked on an open fire each day. The group was divided into different work teams: three groups for cooking, one for each meal, then there was the logistics – who had to help set up the camp, cleaners who ensured we maintained the area and a group for liturgy. No one was exempt from work, and even though tired and exhausted from walking, we still had to take our turn serving the community.

And the fourth pillar was prayer. God was at the heart of all that we did. Most of our young people were experiencing Church and prayer in a new way. Each morning we had a novena reflection on

a pilgrimage experience from the Bible. During the morning, as we walked, we were encouraged to share and reflect on the biblical story. Each afternoon we joined the host community for Mass. In the moonlight, we shared prayer which was a reflective review of the day, modelled on the Ignatian Examen. This time of reflection was a beautiful experience of sharing. The young people shared their experience at seeing the Nile and swimming in it for the first time, others reflected on the joy of seeing mountains and tarmac roads. There were also fears of moving into new areas and experiencing new cultures. The prayers always ended with a plea to all the saints to help us meet the Pope.

And we met the Pope. Our journey continues, we returned home, sore, blistered, but with light hearts and a renewed sense of what it means to be a young Church and to play a part in building peace in the new country of South Sudan.