

South Sudan

Why did Pope Francis kiss the feet of South Sudan's warring leaders?

Conflict situation report

South Sudan is the world's newest state, founded in 2011 after decades of conflict between the north and south of Sudan.

The creation of this new country at first brought hope. It has the river Nile, fertile earth and oil. Its people should be able to thrive.

Yet since 2013 there has been violence, mainly between two ethnic groups: the dominant Dinka led by President Salva Kiir, and the minority Nuer led by Riek Machar. They have been fighting for control of the country, its oil reserves and its best pastureland. Mostly they are rivals, occasionally they have peace deals and share power.

The cost of war

Civilians have paid the price for the brutal war. The UN estimates 19,000 children have been forced into service by armed groups. Nearly half the population depends on aid. South Sudan ranked last on the 2019 UN World Happiness Report.



"The civil war has killed more than 400,000 people, ruined the economy, driven four million people from their homes and disrupted the education of generations," explains Fr. James Oyet. He works in the South Sudan Council of Churches, who cooperate to promote peace in their different communities.

The Church's path to peace



"We are working with **war-torn communities on peace-building and reconciliation.**"

The Catholic Church in South Sudan is trusted by people on all sides of the conflict. This gives it a special peace-building role, supported by agencies like CAFOD and our sister agency Trócaire.

The different Christian Churches have an "Action Plan for Peace," as Fr. James Oyet says. Leaders like him set up face-to-face meetings between the warring sides in safe settings, so they can talk to each other and try to find a way forward.

Local people are also being trained in trauma healing, to help their communities deal with the emotional impact of the terrible years of conflict.

"My hope is the last thing to die," says Fr. James. "With international support we can turn a 'bad deal' – death and destruction – into a good one, where there is peace and reconstruction."

Pope Francis kneels

Pope Francis invited President Salva Kiir and other opposition leaders to the Vatican in April 2019 for a retreat. An uneasy ceasefire had been in place since the previous September.

The Archbishop of Canterbury and the Moderator of the Church of Scotland helped lead this meeting, showing how Christians are joining to work for reconciliation in the wounded country.

In the Vatican, people who had fought one another prayed together instead. Pope Francis said: "I am asking you as a brother to stay in peace. I am asking you from my heart, let us go forward."

Dramatically, he then knelt and kissed the feet of the opposing leaders. Salva Kiir, later said that he "trembled" as Pope Francis knelt before him. Many in the room wept.

The latest peace deal

A few months later in February 2020, a unity government was formed, bringing together rival leaders. "How can we not bring peace if the Pope pushes us to do so?" said the different sides.

However, the political future of the country is still very fragile. As Fr. James says: "Ink on paper is not enough. There needs to be change at the grassroots level."

Myanmar

How can young people change hearts and minds in the midst of war?

Conflict situation report

Myanmar, also known as Burma, is rich in natural resources but is one of the world's poorest countries, due to decades of violence, corruption and military rule. Although there has been a civilian government since 2015, the army is still very powerful.

Ever since independence from Britain in 1948 there has been civil war in Myanmar. More than 135 ethnic groups are governed by the Burman majority. The failure to grant political and human rights to these minorities causes tension and violence.

A dozen armed ethnic groups are fighting the military for the right to govern themselves, and for control of resources. There is conflict and ecological damage linked to the trafficking of drugs, timber, gems and precious metals. Violence and poverty leave young people with very few positive choices in their lives.

In 2017 a campaign of violence led to over 700,000 Rohingya Muslim people fleeing the country in fear of their lives. This minority population are widely discriminated against by Buddhist nationalists. In a crackdown by the army, they were driven out of their homes and thousands were killed. Most fled across the border into Bangladesh where they live as refugees, dependent on aid from international organisations like CAFOD.



Young people against violence

Against this backdrop, many young people in Myanmar find themselves trapped in a culture of violence and tension between different cultures and religions. Yet some are determined to make positive changes in their communities.

Nan Ngurn Hom, 23, lives in northern Shan State, a conflict zone. A Buddhist, she is in a group that gets young people from different faiths and backgrounds to meet and talk, while creating eco projects like mud houses or recycling.

Working together on something they all care about, young Buddhists, Christians and Muslims discover that they are not enemies after all. This way they can become leaders for change, taking new attitudes back to their communities.

"It gives us a feeling of hope," they say. "It brings a realisation that we are not alone and there are others who feel, think and act from the same ethics and values as us."



Photo: Freeland

The way forward

"Ethnic or religious divides needn't be an obstacle when we work together for a just and equal society," says Julian of our CAFOD team in Myanmar. "Issues like climate change affect all of us, whatever our background. Our peace-building work with young people shows that we are stronger if we act together to transform our communities and society for the better."

The Catholic Church in Myanmar is urging peace and reconciliation to end the civil war, asking the government to find a political rather than a military solution. In other words: talking not fighting.

Conflict situation report

Colombia has been torn apart by an internal conflict lasting over 50 years. More than 280,000 people have been killed in the fighting between the army, guerrillas, paramilitary groups and criminal gangs. The conflict is complex, but it grew out of inequality and a struggle for land. Poorer people had no voice in society.

In recent years, the violence has been fuelled by drug trafficking and illegal gold mining amongst other issues. Sadly, violence has become normalised, not only on a political level but in daily life, between neighbours, families, even school pupils.

Peace of a kind

In 2016 the government signed a peace deal with a major guerrilla group, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). Fighters handed in weapons in return for a peace agreement that promises to look at root causes of the conflict such as poverty and injustice. However, talks with another armed group, the National Liberation Army (ELN), have stalled.

The poorest are worst hit, especially rural people. There are over 7.8 million internally displaced people in Colombia, the highest number in the world. Those who stand up for the poor and for the peace process are targeted: tragically, over 400 human rights activists and community leaders have been killed in Colombia just since 2016. CAFOD works to defend social leaders in their dangerous struggles.



The role of the Church

Catholicism is Colombia's main religion, and the Church promotes peace and human rights in many ways. It enabled victims to participate in the 2016 peace deal and checks whether the agreement is being respected. Very importantly, it works to try and get truth, justice and reparation for victims of the conflict, to help them deal with the pain of the past. "Truth is an inseparable companion of justice and mercy," said Pope Francis on a visit to Colombia in 2017. "Truth should not lead to revenge, but rather to reconciliation and forgiveness."

Young peacemakers

Fernando, 17, is from Magdalena Medio in northern Colombia. Here three generations have known little else but fear and violence. Armed groups continue to recruit young people in the area for their operations.

"I see conflict on a daily basis," says Fernando, who has a special role resolving disputes between pupils at his school. He believes peace must start with ourselves. "Along with my friends and other young people, I can bring a message of peace to everyone I meet.... if you have been hurt or damaged, you have to learn to forgive."

Local experts funded by CAFOD work in 34 secondary schools and four local organisations in Magdalena Medio. The aim is to change the attitudes and behaviour of young people, their teachers, parents and families, and in this way build more peaceful and tolerant communities.

"As young people we have a responsibility towards our country," says Rosana, one of the young leaders. "We can choose to make a difference and are ready to give it our all. I am part of the peace generation."



Photo: Louise Norton