

Preparations for Pope Francis visit and what he represents in South Sudan context

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As soon as the **Holy Father Pope Francis** confirmed his long overdue visit to South Sudan in November 2022. The preparations started immediately beginning from composing welcoming songs, dances, the ground where the prayers will be held is being decorated beautifully to reflect the beauty of the Holy Father's visit to the nation. Roads that were once worn out are being maintained to make the Holy Father's ride in the city a smooth one.

The visit is being discussed in every corner of the city and people are questioning what the visit symbolises in the country that has been at war within itself for almost ten years.

I went to one of the offices and I found staff discussing if the days the Pope will spend in the country would be declared public holidays. One of the staff retorted and said, "even if they don't declare those days a public holiday, I would not come to work because I want to see the Holy Father live in Juba".

The security is already scaled up at the nunciature and other places that the Holy Father will visit in Juba. Some people have gone as far as buying new clothes and some women went to the hair salons to make their hair look beautiful. It feels like a Spear Master is making his yearly visit to his subjects.

The visit of the Holy Father is the first of its kind in South Sudan as a predominantly Christian country. It is also the first time the archbishop of Canterbury and the moderator of the church of Scotland will be visiting the country.

This visit symbolises unity and its importance. The visit of the three leaders of three different Christian denominations symbolises that the differences in our faiths, political ideologies etc should unite us more than they divide us because the common goal is deliver better services to the citizens.

This visit will also show our leaders that different political leaders can still unite for a common cause that we as South Sudanese yearn for, and that is PEACE. That they should come together and leave their political differences aside and work together for a peaceful nation.

What **Pope Francis** represents to me or to the South Sudan community is that he is like "**Spear Master**". Traditionally, among the Dinka community, a Spear Master is someone that exhibits supernatural powers. He is someone who is believed to be talking to the gods. He is someone who on behalf of the gods, can bless or curse the people. He is someone who people go to for blessings. When there is drought, people go to him to pray for the rain to come. If there is a calamity, people gather in his shrine and ask him to plead to gods on behalf of the people. They ask him to offer sacrifices to please the gods and make atonement on behalf of the people.

A Spear Master lives in a specific place where the shrine is built and can pay visits to other parts within his community. When it is known that he is visiting, people prepare themselves well with songs, dances, oxen to be slaughtered and he jumps over them as he enters every village in his territory. Footpaths are widened

and cleaned for safe passage of the Spear Master. He is accompanied by people who assist him in his work and where a possible successor would be selected. This selection is believed to be guided and made by the ancestral gods.

The Spear Master brings blessings from the gods to the people. He preaches the message of peace to all his subjects and will give stern warning to those who disobey him, telling them not to invite the wrath of gods upon themselves.

The Spear Master brings **a message of reconciliation** to the clans who are in conflict and usually, he presides over those ceremonies. He blessed those who are sick and gives hope to the hopeless. He is respected and feared as the mouthpiece of the gods on earth.

I believe that this is what Pope Francis represents on this upcoming pilgrimage. He is the mouthpiece of our Lord Jesus Christ on earth. All what our Holy Father is today to the Catholic faithful is what our Spear Master used to be. He intercedes for us, blesses us, asked for forgiveness from God almighty on behalf of his flock.

His visit to South Sudan is to **bring a message of peace to the top leaders of the country and a message of hope to those who are internally displaced**. He will bring along blessings from his throne in Rome. He comes to tell our leaders that it is important to have a peaceful nation for people to thrive and enjoy the services from their government.

I also see that the coming of the archbishop of Canterbury and the moderator of the church of Scotland is very significant in this era where churches talk ill of each other. Instead of preaching the common message of salvation, they are preaching against each other and behave like competitors.

This ecumenical visit will show that although they have different identities and names, the purpose is the same, to preach the message of salvation to all the people and believe in Jesus Christ as well as life after death. We are aware that Rome is mediating peace talks between some rebel groups and the government. The Holy Father has played a crucial role in making sure that there is peace in South Sudan. Beginning from kissing the feet of our leaders to now coming personally to the country.

During the North and South Sudan war, Pope John Paul II paid a visit to Khartoum in February 1992 to bring hope to the marginalised Christians. The Pope's visit put pressure on Khartoum and the rebels to find an amicable solution to the country's conflict. Eventually, the South separated from the North in 2011 through a referendum.

I am hopeful that the current visit of Pope Francis to South Sudan will make our leaders reach a permanent solution to our country's conflicts that have claimed the lives of over a million people.

This will restore the lost hopes of the people of South Sudan.

May God bless the Holy Father as he shepherds God's flock.