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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) – Official Reception, Welcome Ceremony, Courtesy Visit to the President of the Republic, and Meeting with the Authorities

Official Reception at N'djili Airport, Kinshasa, Welcome Ceremony and Courtesy Visit to the President of the Republic at the *Palais de la Nation* in Kinshasa

Meeting with the Authorities, Civil Society and the Diplomatic Corps in the garden of the *Palais de la Nation*

Official Reception at N'djili Airport, Kinshasa, Welcome Ceremony and Courtesy Visit to the President of the Republic at the *Palais de la Nation* in Kinshasa

Upon arrival at N'djili International Airport, Kinshasa, the Holy Father Francis was received by the Prime Minister of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, His Excellency Mr. Jean-Michel Sama Lukonde Kyenge. Two children in traditional dress offered him flowers.

Then, after the Guard of Honour, the Pope and the Prime Minister proceeded to the VIP lounge of the airport for the presentation of the delegations, and they remained for a brief meeting.

Pope Francis then transferred by car to the *Palais de la Nation* for the welcome ceremony. Upon arrival the Pope was received at the entrance by the President, His Excellency Mr. Félix Antoine Tshisekedi Tshilombo.

Following the Guard of Honour, the execution of the anthems and the honouring of the flags, and the presentation of the respective delegations, the Pope and the President of the Republic retired to the *Salle Présidentielle* of the Palace for the private meeting.

After the private meeting, the exchange of gifts and the presentation of the family took place. At the end, the

Holy Father Francis transferred to the garden of the *Palais de la Nation* for the meeting with the Authorities, Civil Society and the Diplomatic Corps.

Meeting with the Authorities, Civil Society and the Diplomatic Corps in the garden of the *Palais de la Nation*

At 17.30, the Holy Father Francis met with the Authorities, Civil Society and the Diplomatic Corps in the garden of the *Palais de la Nation*.

After the introductory speech from the President of the Republic, His Excellency Mr. Félix Antoine Tshisekedi Tshilombo, the Pope delivered his address.

At the end of the meeting, after taking leave of the President of the Republic, the Holy Father transferred by car to the apostolic nunciature of Kinshasa where he was received at the entrance by the nunciature staff and a group of young people from the Kinshasa youth choir, who performed some popular Congolese hymns.

The following is the address delivered by the Pope during the meeting with the Authorities, Civil Society and the Diplomatic Corps.

Address of the Holy Father

Mr President,
Honourable Members of Government and the Diplomatic Corps,
Eminent Religious and Civil Authorities,
Distinguished Representatives of Civil Society and the World of Culture,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I offer you a cordial greeting and I thank His Excellency the President for his kind words. I am happy to be here in this beautiful, vast and luxuriant land, which embraces, to the north, the equatorial forest, in the centre and towards the south, plateaus and wooded savannas, to the east, hills, mountains, volcanoes and lakes, and to the west great bodies of water, with the Congo River that flows into the ocean. In your country, which is like a continent itself within the greater continent of Africa, it seems that the entire earth breathes. Yet if the geography of this verdant lung is so rich and variegated, its history has not been comparably blessed. Torn by war, the Democratic Republic of the Congo continues to witness within its confines conflicts and forced migrations, and to suffer from terrible forms of exploitation, unworthy of humanity and of creation. This country, so immense and full of life, this *diaphragm of Africa*, struck by violence like a blow to the stomach, has seemed for some time to be gasping for breath. Mr President, you spoke of this forgotten genocide that the Republic of the Congo is suffering.

As you, the Congolese people, fight to preserve your dignity and your territorial integrity against deplorable attempts to fragment the country, I come to you, in the name of Jesus, as a pilgrim of reconciliation and of peace. I have greatly desired to be here and now at last I have come to bring you the closeness, the affection and the consolation of the entire Church and to learn from your example of patience, courage and struggle.

I would like to speak to you using an image that nicely symbolizes the luminous beauty of this land: the image of the diamond. Dear women and men of the Congo, your country is truly *a diamond of creation*. At the same time, you, all of you, are infinitely more precious than any treasure found in this fruitful soil! I am here to embrace you and to remind you that you yourselves are of inestimable worth, that the Church and the Pope have confidence in you, and that they believe in your future, the future that is *in your hands* and for which you deserve to devote all your gifts of intelligence, wisdom and industry. Take heart, my Congolese brothers and sisters! Arise, take

once more into your hands, like a pure diamond, all that you are, your dignity and your calling to preserve in harmony and peace this home in which you dwell. Revive the spirit of your national hymn, dreaming and putting into practice its message: "Through hard work, we will build a country more beautiful than before, in peace."

Dear friends, diamonds are usually rare, yet here they are abundant. If that is true of the material wealth hidden in the soil, it is even more true of the spiritual wealth present within your hearts. For it is from hearts that peace and development are born, because, with God's help, men and women are capable of justice and of forgiveness, of concord and reconciliation, of commitment and perseverance in putting to good use the many talents they have received. Here, at the beginning of my journey, I want to appeal to you: may every Congolese feel called to do his or her part! May violence and hatred no longer find room in the heart or on the lips of anyone, since these are inhuman and unchristian sentiments that arrest development and bring us back to a gloomy past.

In the light of arrested development and regression to the past, it is a tragedy that these lands, and more generally the whole African continent, continue to endure various forms of exploitation. There is a slogan that emerges from the subconscious of many cultures and peoples: "Africa must be exploited". This is terrible! Political exploitation gave way to an "economic colonialism" that was equally enslaving. As a result, this country, massively plundered, has not benefited adequately from its immense resources: paradoxically, the riches of its land have made it "foreign" to its very inhabitants. The poison of greed has *smearred its diamonds with blood*. This is a tragedy to which the economically more advanced world often closes its eyes, ears and mouth. Yet this country and this continent deserve to be respected and listened to; they deserve to find space and receive attention. Hands off the Democratic Republic of the Congo! Hands off Africa! Stop choking Africa: it is not a mine to be stripped or a terrain to be plundered. May Africa be the protagonist of its own destiny! May the world acknowledge the catastrophic things that were done over the centuries to the detriment of the local peoples, and not forget this country and this continent. May Africa, the smile and hope of the world, count for more. May it be spoken of more frequently, and have greater weight and prestige among the nations!

Room needs to be made for diplomacy that is authentically human, for a diplomacy where peoples are concerned for other peoples, for a diplomacy centred not on control over land and resources, expansionism and increased profits, but rather on providing opportunities for people to grow and develop. In the case of this people, one has the impression that the international community has practically resigned itself to the violence devouring it. We cannot grow accustomed to the bloodshed that has marked this country for decades, causing millions of deaths that remain mostly unknown elsewhere. What is happening here needs to be known. The current peace processes, which I greatly encourage, need to be sustained by concrete deeds, and commitments should be maintained. Thank God, there are those who are contributing to the good of the local population and to a genuine development through successful projects: not merely through handouts but through projects aimed at an integral development. I express immense gratitude to the countries and the organizations that are providing substantial aid in this regard, helping to combat poverty and disease, supporting the rule of law and promoting respect for human rights. It is my hope that they can continue to carry out these efforts courageously and to the full.

Let us think again of the diamond. Once polished, its beauty also derives from its shape, from the harmonious arrangement of its many facets. In the same way, this country, with its precious legacy of pluralism, has a "polyhedral" character. That richness must be preserved, avoiding any form of regression to tribalism and hostility. A partisan spirit that stubbornly promotes one's own ethnic group or particular interests, thus nurturing spirals of hatred and violence, is detrimental to everyone, since it blocks the necessary "chemistry of the whole". Indeed, from a chemical standpoint, it is interesting that diamonds are made up of simple atoms of carbon which, if differently bonded, form graphite: in effect, the difference between the brilliance of the diamond and the darkness of graphite comes from the way the individual atoms are arranged within the crystalline network. Leaving aside the metaphor, the problem is not human nature or the nature of ethnic and social groups, but the way in which they choose to live together: their willingness or not to encounter one another, to be reconciled and to start anew makes the difference between the grimness of conflict and a radiant future of peace and prosperity.

Dear friends, the heavenly Father wants us to accept one another as brothers and sisters of a single family and to work for a future together with others, and not against others. *Bintu bantu*: thus one of your proverbs eloquently states that true wealth is found in people and in their relationships with one another. In a particular

way, the religions, with their patrimony of wisdom, are called to contribute to this richness, in the daily effort to renounce every form of aggression, proselytism and constraint, for these are means unworthy of human freedom. When people stoop to imposing those means through deceit and force, in an indiscriminate attempt to collect followers, they severely wound the conscience of others and turn their backs on the true God, because – let it never be forgotten – “where the spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom” (2 Cor 3:17) and where there is no freedom, there is no Spirit of the Lord. In the effort to build a future of peace and of fraternity, the members of civil society, some of whom are here present, also have an essential role to play. Often they have demonstrated the ability to stand up to injustice and social decay at the cost of great sacrifice, in order to defend human rights, the availability of a quality education and a more dignified life for everyone. I am deeply grateful to the women and men, and particularly to the young people of this country, who have suffered in various degrees for this, and I pay them homage.

The diamond, in its transparency, marvellously reflects the light it receives. Many of you are similarly “illustrious” for the role you play in society. Those holding civil and governmental offices are called to operate with crystalline clarity, experiencing the charge they have received as a means of serving society. Power is meaningful only if it becomes a form of service. How important it is that civic responsibilities be carried out in this spirit, avoiding authoritarianism, the quest for quick profit and the greed that the apostle Paul defines as “the root of all evils” (1 Tim 6:10). Likewise, that free, transparent and credible elections be promoted; even greater participation in the peace processes be allowed to women, to young people, to different groups and to socially marginalized groups; that the common good and people’s security be pursued, rather than personal or group interests; that the presence of the state in every part of the territory be strengthened; and the many refugees and displaced persons be cared for. May no one be manipulated, much less bought, by those who would foment violence in the country, and exploit it in order to make shameful business deals. This leads only to discredit and disgrace, together with death and misery. It is better to stay close to people, be aware of how they live. People are trusting when they feel the closeness of those who govern them, not out of expediency or for show but to serve others.

What dims the light of goodness in a society is often the darkness of injustice and corruption. Centuries ago, Saint Augustine, who was born on this continent, asked: “If there is no respect for justice, what are states if not a great confederacy of thieves?” (*De civ. Dei*, IV, 4). God is always on the side of those who hunger and thirst for justice (cf. Mt 5:6). One must never tire of promoting law and equity everywhere, combating impunity and the manipulation of laws and information.

A diamond emerges from the earth valuable, but rough and needing to be polished. The most precious diamonds of these lands are the sons and daughters of this nation; they need to have access to an education that enables them to make their innate talents shine brightly. Education is fundamental: it is the path to the future, the road to take for achieving the complete freedom of this country and of the African continent. It is urgent to invest in education, in order to prepare societies that will be unified only if they are educated well, autonomous only if they are aware of their own possibilities and capable of developing them with responsibility and perseverance. Yet many children receive no schooling. How many of them, instead of receiving a good education, are exploited! All too many of them die, subjected to servile labour in the mines. No effort should be spared to denounce and finally end the scourge of child labour. How many girls are marginalized and their dignity violated! Children, young girls and all young people are the “now” of hope, they are hope: let us not allow that hope to be stifled, but instead cultivate it with passion!

The diamond, as a gift of the earth, recalls our responsibility to be good stewards of creation, to protect the natural environment. Situated in the heart of Africa, the Democratic Republic of the Congo is host to one of the great green lungs of the world, which must be preserved. As with peace and development, also in this area there needs to be an ample and fruitful cooperation that can permit an effective intervention without imposing external models that are more useful to those who help than to who are helped. Many have offered Africa help in the effort to combat climate change and the coronavirus. While these are certainly opportunities to be welcomed, the greatest need is for healthcare and social models that do not simply respond to pressing needs of the moment, but help improve the life of society: through sound structures and honest and competent personnel, so as to overcome the grave problems that block development from the outset, like hunger and disease.

The diamond, to conclude, is the hardest of the minerals found in nature; it is highly resistant to chemical agents.

Repeated violent attacks and so many situations of unrest could weaken the resistance of the Congolese people, undermine their resolve and lead to discouragement and resignation. Yet in the name of Christ, who is the God of hope, the God of every possibility, who always gives us the strength to begin anew, in the name of the dignity and worth of the most precious diamonds of this land, which are its citizens, I would like to encourage everyone to undertake a courageous and inclusive social renewal. This is demanded by the splendid yet wounded history of this country, and by its young people and children in particular. I stand with you and I accompany with my prayers and closeness every effort made to achieve a peaceful, harmonious and prosperous future for this great country. God bless the entire Congolese nation!
