



The Holy See

APOSTOLIC JOURNEY OF HIS HOLINESS POPE FRANCIS
TO THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO AND SOUTH SUDAN
(ECUMENICAL PEACE PILGRIMAGE TO SOUTH SUDAN)
[31 January - 5 February 2023]

MEETING WITH REPRESENTATIVES FROM SOME CHARITIES

ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS

Apostolic Nunciature (Kinshasa)

Wednesday, 1st February 2023

[Multimedia]

Dear brothers and sisters,

I greet you with affection and thank you for your songs, your testimonies and for everything that you have told me, but especially for everything that you are doing! In this country, where the sound of violence is heard like the loud crash of a felled tree, you are the forest that quietly grows each day and makes the air clean and breathable. Naturally, a falling tree makes more noise, but God loves and blesses the generosity that silently sprouts and bears fruit, and he looks with joy upon all those who serve the needy. That is how goodness grows: in the simplicity of hands and hearts stretched out to others and in the courage of small steps that approach the poor and vulnerable in the name of Jesus. The proverb Cecilia quoted is really true: “A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step”.

One thing struck me: You did not simply list social problems or provide me with statistics on poverty, but more importantly you spoke with affection about the poor. You spoke about yourselves and about people you did not know before, but who have now become familiar to you; people with names and faces. I am grateful that you are able to see Jesus in the least of his

brothers and sisters. The Lord is to be sought and loved in the poor and we, as Christians, must take care not to turn our backs on them. There is something wrong when a believer keeps Christ's loved ones at a distance.

While so many today dismiss the poor, you embrace them; while the world exploits them, you encourage them. Encouragement versus exploitation: Here is a forest that is growing, even as deforestation and waste runs rampant! I would like to make better known what you are doing, to promote growth and hope in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and on this entire continent. I came here out of a desire to be a voice for the voiceless. How I wish the media would give more space to this country and to Africa as a whole! Would that the peoples, cultures, sufferings and hopes of this young continent of the future be better known! People would discover immense talents and tales of true human and Christian grandeur, emerging from a healthy environment marked by respect for children, the elderly and all creation.

I am happy to be this voice here at the Nunciature, because the Papal Representations, the "houses of the Pope" throughout the world, are and must be promoters of human development, centres of charity, at the forefront of the diplomacy of mercy by their efforts to facilitate effective aid and to favour networks of cooperation. This is now taking place without fanfare in many parts of the world, as it has for a long time here. This house has been a neighbourly presence for decades. Established ninety years ago as an Apostolic Delegation, in a few days it will celebrate the sixtieth anniversary of its elevation to the rank of Nunciature.

Brothers and sisters, you love this country and you devote yourselves to its people. What you do is wonderful, but by no means easy. We are brought to tears when we hear stories like those you have told me, of suffering men and women left homeless by general indifference. This leads them to live on the streets, exposing them to the risk of physical violence and sexual abuse and even to the accusation of witchcraft, whereas they are only in need of love and care. I was struck by what you told us, Tekadio. Due to leprosy, you still feel today, in 2023, "discriminated against, looked down upon and humiliated", while people, with a mixture of shame, incomprehension and fear, rush to disinfect where even your shadow has passed. Poverty and rejection are an offence against human beings, robbing them of their dignity. They are like ashes that extinguish the fire he or she carries within. Yes, every person, created in the image of God, shines with a bright fire, but love alone removes the grime that conceals that image. Only by restoring dignity do we restore humanity! I was saddened to learn that here too, as in many parts of the world, children and the elderly are discarded. This is scandalous and even more so, detrimental to the entire society, whose soundness depends precisely on the care it provides to the elderly and children, for they are its roots and its future. Let us not forget: true human development cannot flourish where there is no memory or future. Memory is kept alive by the old while the future is carried forward by the young.

Brothers and sisters, today I would like to ask two questions of you, and through you, of the many

who work for the good of this great country. First: *Is it worth it?* Is it worth the effort to battle this constantly increasing ocean of need? Isn't it instead a useless and often discouraging endeavour? What Sister Marie Celeste said can help us to answer that question. She said: "Despite our insignificance, the crucified Lord wants us at his side to help him bear the tragedies of the world." True, charity attunes us to God and he surprises us with unexpected wonders through those he loves. Your stories are full of stupendous happenings, known to the heart of God and impossible to attribute merely to human strength. I think of what you told us, Pierre, when you said that in the desert of powerlessness and indifference, in the sea of sorrow, you and your friends discovered that God had not forgotten you, because he sent you people who did not turn back as they were crossing the road where you stood. In their faces, you discovered the face of Jesus and now you want to help others do the same. Goodness is like that, it spreads; it is not paralyzed by resignation or statistics, but impels us to give others what we ourselves freely received. I receive and I give. Young people in particular need to see this: they need to see faces that overcome indifference by looking people in the eye, and hands that do not wield weapons or misuse money, but reach out to those who are down on the ground and raise them back up to their dignity, the dignity of a daughter and son of God. There is only one instance in which it is proper to look down on a person: to help lift up that person. Otherwise, we should never look down on a person.

So it is worth it! It is a good sign that the civil authorities, through recent agreements with the Episcopal Conference, have acknowledged and esteemed the efforts of those engaged in social and charitable work. This certainly does not mean that we can systematically delegate to volunteers care for the most frail and vulnerable, or for health and education. These are primary tasks for those who govern; they should be concerned to ensure that basic services are provided to those living far from large urban centres. At the same time, believers in Christ must never sully the witness of charity, which is a witness to God, by pursuing privilege, prestige, fame and power. It is a bad thing that we should never do. No, our means, resources and goals are to be used for the poor. Those who care for them are always called to remember that *power is service*, and that charity does not make us rest on our laurels, but demands urgency and concrete actions. In this regard, among the many things needing to be done, I would like to highlight a challenge that concerns everyone and not simply this country. What causes poverty is not so much the absence of goods and opportunities, but their unequal distribution. Those who are prosperous, especially if they are Christians, are challenged to share what they have with those who lack the bare necessities, and all the more so if they are members of the same people. This is not a matter of benevolence, but of justice. It is not philanthropy, but faith. For, as Scripture says, "faith without works is dead" (*Jas 2:26*).

This brings us to our second question, which has to do with the duty and urgency of doing good. *How is it to be done?* How is charity to be carried out? What criteria should be followed? Here I would offer you three simple thoughts. They are familiar to the charitable institutions working here, but they are helpful to recall, so that serving Jesus in the poor may become an ever more fruitful form of witness.

First of all, charity calls for *setting an example*. It is not simply something we do; it is an expression of who we are. It is a way of life, a way of living out the Gospel, and it requires credibility and transparency. I am thinking of the financial and administrative management of projects, but also of the need to provide appropriate services in a competent manner. This is precisely the spirit that marks many ecclesial works that benefit this country and have distinguished its history. May we always set a good example!

Secondly, *being far-sighted*, having foresight. It is vital that initiatives and good works not only respond to immediate needs, but also prove sustainable over time. They are not meant to be welfare-oriented, but to consider what will prove most effective in the long term; in this way, they can last and not end with those who started them. In this country, for example, the soil is incredibly fertile and extremely productive. The generosity of those who provide you with aid must appreciate this reality and foster the growth of the people who inhabit this land, teaching them how to cultivate it, and creating development projects that leave the future to their hands. Rather than distributing goods that will always be in short supply, it is better to transmit knowledge and the tools that make development autonomous and sustainable. Here, I would mention the great contribution made by Catholic health care services, which in this country, as in many others throughout the world, offer relief and hope to people, assisting the suffering in a spirit of generosity and competence, seeking always, as is right, to help others through the use of appropriate and up-to-date means.

Setting an example, being far-sighted and, now – the third element – *being connected*. Brothers and sisters, you must network, not only virtually but concretely. We see this illustrated in your country in the *symphony of life* found in the great forest and its diverse vegetation. Networking calls for ever greater cooperation, constant interaction with one another, always in communion with the local Churches and the region. Networking: each according to his or her charism, yet together, connected, sharing concerns, priorities, and needs, without remaining isolated or self-referential, prepared to work alongside other Christian communities and other religions, and the many humanitarian organizations present here – all for the good of the poor. Network with everyone.

Dear brothers and sisters, I leave you with these reflections and I thank you for what you in turn have given me today. Indeed, thank very much for you have touched my heart. You are a great treasure. I bless you and ask you, please, to continue to pray for me. I need your prayers. Thank you!