



**Department of Justice, Peace, and Human Development  
Office of International Justice and Peace**

**Backgrounder on the Ecumenical Pilgrimage of Peace to  
South Sudan**

“I think of South Sudan and the plea for peace arising from its people who, weary of violence and poverty, await concrete results from the process of national reconciliation. I would like to contribute to that process, not alone, but by making an ecumenical pilgrimage together with two dear brothers, with Anglican Archbishop Justin Welby of Canterbury and the Rev. Iain Greenshields, moderator of the Presbyterian Church of Scotland.”

It is with these words that the Holy Father Pope Francis expressed his intention to meet with the Government of South Sudan and its religious leaders in another urgent effort to bring peace to a troubled and wounded people. This ecumenical trip comes despite the Holy Father’s advanced age and his infirmity that requires him to use a wheelchair.

His first encounter with the government and religious leaders of South Sudan came in 2019 when Pope Francis, Archbishop Justin Welby, the Archbishop of Canterbury and Rev. Iain Greenshields, the Moderator of the Church of Scotland (Presbyterian Church) called them to Rome for a spiritual retreat. It was at this meeting when Pope Francis made the dramatic and humbling gesture of going to his knees and kissing the feet of President Salva Kiir and Vice President Riek Machar. His message and gesture that flashed around the world was clear, he was begging them, with an extraordinary gesture of humility, to make [peace](#). The civil war in South Sudan continues to this day.

Throughout those long years of civil war (1983-2013 and 2015-2023), the Catholic Church itself and as a founding member of the Sudan Council of Churches (SCC), stood by the people providing schools, health centers and pastoral healing where there was no government presence at all. The SCC worked with the World Council of Churches and Catholic Relief Services to offer humanitarian aid consisting of food, water, shelter, and healing.

From 2006-2011 during the interim period leading to the referendum for independence the Church with the South Sudan Council of Churches (SSCC) continued aid and worked with the international community on a sustained advocacy effort to ensure that South Sudan got its fair shot at independence through a free and fair referendum. They traveled to Europe and the United States on a number of occasions and the Office on International Justice and Peace (IJP) of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops visited South Sudan around a dozen times to show solidarity and visible support to their cause.

Independence unfortunately did not bring an end to the deep ethnic divisions in the South Sudan Government and the ruling party. It shattered into factions vying for political dominance and access to

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oil revenue and descended into massive corruption. These deep divisions broke out into a new and threatening wave of violence in 2013. A peace deal was negotiated in 2015, but another round of fighting broke out again in 2016. A renewed agreement was signed in 2018. It has led to a new united government and a lull in fighting, but much more remains.

In 2015 the SSCC met in a strategic planning assembly in Uganda and drew up an Action Plan for Peace (APP). The APP consisted of three strategies: advocacy with the South Sudan leaders and with world partners; the creation of Neutral Forums (safe spaces) where the parties in conflict could meet to de-escalate the conflict; and a program of reconciliation and healing for communities badly affected by the crisis. The SSCC has made some progress in these goals, but not sufficient to stop the fighting, build peace and promote healing. The SSCC and the individual Church members have also worked to rebuild their parishes, dioceses, pastoral and social work structures.

It is into this period and place that Pope Francis, Archbishop Justin Welby and Moderator Iain Greenshields will now begin their pilgrimage of peace. They will renew their call to President Salva Kiir and Vice President Riek Machar to unite, build an open and responsive government, provide the social services required of a government and build peace. They will display their solidarity with the Church and raise its profile in the country as a force for peace and prosperity. The three leaders will do everything they can to reinvigorate and empower the Church and the SSCC to transform the national narrative and intensify their call and action for peace. This in turn may empower the people of South Sudan to rally around their religious leaders to transform their country.

The Church in the United States will continue walk in solidarity with the Church in her mission. We will follow the ecumenical pilgrimage of peace with prayer, and support and urge others to do the same. It is our hope that this visit will inspire all the Church efforts to promote a lasting peace, continue humanitarian relief efforts and move to real development programs that will build a future of prosperity. We call on the United States and other donor countries to join and support the Church in South Sudan in their courageous efforts in pursuit of peace.

Let's be praying for Pope Francis's apostolic visits to DRC and South Sudan, click here to learn more from our [Renewed Call to Solidarity with Africa](#) document and to the [South Sudan page on our website](#).

**RESOURCES:** Visit: <https://www.usccb.org/committees/international-justice-and-peace>. Contact: *Steve Hilbert*, USCCB Office of International Justice and Peace, [shilbert@usccb.org](mailto:shilbert@usccb.org), 202-541-3149.