

# Apostleship of Prayer: Pope's intention for May

**For the African Church: that it may be a seed for unity and a source of hope for the continent.**

Many Australians today place little trust in institutions. Parliaments, banks and churches have lost much of their credibility. All of them have been tainted by scandalous and destructive behaviour that has eroded the good reputation they once had in the community.

That loss of trust may well be merited, but it is also a loss for society. Institutions that have earned a reputation for living by the beliefs and values that they profess provide a compass for public life. This is important particularly where civil society is not strong and where widespread conflict and mistrust divide the groups that compose it. Churches have traditionally had this role in society, and have been trusted when commenting on values. Even now, when churches are generally less trusted, some church agencies are seen as beacons. We need to think only of the Vinnies or the Salvos. Both are seen to benefit society by being there for people who are doing it hard and by speaking on their behalf. What they profess is mirrored in what they do.

Pope Francis' intention for May recognises the special contribution which a Church that follows Jesus can make to Africa in particular. Many African nations are composed of strong tribal groups and clans with a long history of conflict and of colonial exploitation. In many nations, too, democratic processes, in which ruling parties and heads of state cheerfully hand over power after losing elections, are relative recent. In such societies institutions that do not seek political power and that bring together members of different families, tribes and clans can contribute powerfully to building a united and diverse nation. Their peaceful inner life, their negotiating differences, and the way in which they reach out to other religious groups can encourage national harmony.

The possibilities for churches were shown dramatically in Pope Francis' Retreat for leaders of rival parties and militias in South Sudan. The Pope was joined by the Anglican Archbishop of Canterbury, and concluded the meeting by painfully kneeling to kiss the feet of each of the leaders. The leaders have committed to share power for the benefit of all the people.

In Uganda, too, which was plagued by the remnants of a separatist war and constant atrocities committed both by rebel and national military, Catholic priests came together with Protestant ministers and Muslim imams to bring the warring groups together and bring about peace in the Acholi region.

The Gospel message of reconciliation is indeed a seed that can grow into unity between once hostile religious groups, and flow over into building peaceful institutions. The examples of South Sudan and Uganda show how Catholics inspired by the Gospel can leave the comfort of their own prejudices and communities, reach out to other churches and religions, and then together bring into conversation the leaders of rival groups that have brought terror to the people.

Like our own churches, the African Catholic Church is composed of fearful, frail and sinful people. Like ours, too, its glory lies in the faithfulness and courage of small local congregations who live the Gospel. They have earned our prayers and support.

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