
Looking forward to the Pope's arrival with hope and joy, Fr Kasika: "His visit to our land shows that we are very dear to him"

The Congolese people are filled with joy and hope in anticipation of Pope Francis' visit. The Holy Father will begin his 40th Apostolic Journey tomorrow, January 31st. He is the second Pontiff to visit the central African State, previously visited by St John Paul II in 1980 and 1985. Francis will be staying in Kinshasa, the capital and largest city of the Democratic Republic of Congo, until his departure on February 3rd headed to South Sudan. He will be the first Pope to visit the country, where he will stay until February 5th. There is widespread enthusiasm in Congo, and not only in the capital city, where "everyone is busy preparing to welcome Francis in the best possible way." All 48 ecclesiastical districts in the country are preparing to follow the highlights of the visit, albeit "remotely." That is the case in Kisangani, one of the most populous cities in the Republic. Father **Dieudonné Kambale Kasika**, in charge of university pastoral care, parish priest at the Saint Esprit university parish church and head of communications for the archdiocese of Kisangani - whose archbishop, Marcel Utembi Tapa, is also president of the Episcopal Conference of Congo -, told SIR that an atmosphere of festivity has been prevailing for weeks. "Governments, politicians, ordinary citizens, Catholic and non-Catholic faithful, Muslims, are looking forward to the arrival of the Pope this Tuesday," he said. "Everyone is eagerly awaiting the Pope with open arms. People's faces are filled with joy, it's in the air, in conversations between people on the streets." However, the priest makes no secret of the fact that some people are also afraid that "the visit could be postponed due to some last-minute impediment." In fact, the Apostolic Journey was originally scheduled to take place from July 2 to 7 but Francis was "regretfully" forced to postpone it due to problems with his knee a few days earlier. For Father Dieudonné, the coming days will be "very important" for Congo, theatre of turmoil and violence in various parts of the country for decades. "The Pope wished to visit Congo back in 2017, when President Joseph Kabila was in office, but it wasn't possible at the time," the priest recalls. Thus, the Congolese people have been awaiting this visit for years, and expect "first of all the spiritual comfort of a father who comes to visit a people to whom he has expressed his strong affection and special concern in almost ten years of pontificate, making dozens of appeals for peace." Not only. Fr Kambale Kasika recalls also that on two occasions, on December 1, 2019 and last July 3rd, Francis celebrated Holy Mass in St Peter's Basilica for the Congolese communities of Rome and Italy in the Zairean rite, from the former name of the Democratic Republic of Congo. "His visit to our land shows that we very dear to him", remarked Fr Dieudonné. We are also looking forward to a strong message of peace, a message directed at the government and the armed groups to stop the violence. It is our hope that his presence here will finally bring peace and reconciliation", following the motto of the visit: "All reconciled in Christ." Such an appeal is all the more urgent at this time, given that the presidential elections are planned for December next, and "at the moment - adds the parish priest - the spotlight is on the polls, but in the eastern part of the country, the situation grows worse by the day Strong tensions and clashes between Congo and Rwanda have been ongoing for months. Speeches by the respective presidents resembled declarations of war between the two nations. A DR Congo fighter jet was attacked just a few days ago. The eastern part of the country is facing an alarming scenario of war and violence, with hundreds of people fleeing." The Congolese people have "prayed wholeheartedly" in preparation for the Pope's visit, including a prayer written and circulated by the bishops. "It was recited daily in every parish and religious community as well as in schools," says Fr Dieudonné. "There were also special offerings and clothing items have been made bearing the Pope's image and the motto of the visit. On Wednesday, February 1, when Holy Mass will be celebrated in Kinshasa at N'dolo Airport, university students and other parishioners in Kisangani will gather in church to "follow the Mass broadcast live on television," concludes Fr Kambale Kasika. "We will participate in an atmosphere of prayer and communion with the Pope and with all the faithful who will be able to reach Kinshasa.

Roberta Pumpo