

## SUDAN

# Looming famine ‘unprecedented’

**AID AGENCIES** warned of an “unprecedented” crisis in Sudan as it entered the second year of civil war, writes *Patrick Hudson*.

Fighting between government troops and the Rapid Support Forces militia broke out on 15 April 2023 and has since displaced 8.5 million people and left 25 million in need of urgent assistance, according to figures from Cafod. “Famine looms ominously, threatening to become the worst food crisis in living memory,” said the charity’s country representative for Sudan, Telley Sadia.

“The situation is so unbearable, faithful Muslims have been enquiring about teachings on suicide: they see no way out from this terrible conflict and its ensuing man-made famine,” he said.

Fatima Ahmed, of the Sudanese charity Zenab for Women in Development, said that local initiatives needed support. “People need basic types of food – lentils, sorghum – which are available in the country,” she said. “We should focus on supporting and empowering local responders.”

Aid to the Church in Need has warned of threats to the Christian presence in Sudan. Christians made up 5 per cent of the population before the war but have been badly affected by the conflict.

## RWANDA

# Wounds ‘fresh’ after genocide

**CATHOLIC BISHOPS** in Rwanda said the 1994 genocide caused the country pain “the depth and breadth of which only God knows”, as they prayed for reconciliation on its thirtieth anniversary, writes *Francis Njuguna*.

“Hearts still bleed, wounds are still fresh,” the bishops said in a statement issued on 7 April, as Rwanda commemorated the nearly one million people, largely from the Tutsi ethnic minority, killed over a 13-week period.

Bishop Anacleto Mwumvaneza of Nyundo, who signed the statement as chairman of the Rwandan bishops’ Justice and Peace Commission, said the anniversary “gives us the opportunity to look back on this painful past and opens us to a radiant future ... as a national community ... Forgiveness requested, given and received constitutes the foundation of good human relations.”

# VIEW FROM ROME

Joseph Tulloch



**THE VATICAN’S OFFICIAL** directory, the *Annuario Pontificio*, is a thick, red volume containing Church statistics and contact details for ecclesial officials. A new version appears every year, setting buyers back a hefty €78 (£66.57). The 2024 edition, released last week, contains a surprise: the papal moniker “Patriarch of the West”, dropped by Pope Benedict in 2006, has been re-admitted to the list of the Pope’s “historic titles”.

The change seems to be motivated by the Pope’s desire to deepen relations with the Orthodox Churches. In 2006, when Benedict abandoned the title, the Patriarchate of Constantinople objected that doing so implied “a universal jurisdiction of the bishop of Rome over the entire Church”, including the Orthodox East. Francis has a close relationship with the Patriarch of Constantinople, and the pair are planning a much-anticipated meeting in Nicaea in 2025. The Pope’s re-adoption of the title “Patriarch of the West” seems to be part of the preparations for that event.

None of this, of course, has stopped Francis’ detractors from speculating that his real motive is a desire to further undermine his predecessor’s legacy.

But they needn’t worry. Pope Benedict often wrote about the need to rethink the role of the papacy in relation to the Eastern Churches. The “Ratzinger Proposal”, which went on to become highly significant for East-West ecumenism, suggested that reunion would be possible without the Orthodox having to accept the Pope’s jurisdiction any more than they had in the first millennium.

All that would be necessary, Joseph Ratzinger wrote in 1987, is for the Pope to be recognised as the bishop who “presides in charity” over the others. “Rome”, he said, “need not ask for more.”

**A DEBATE IS** raging here about whether the Partito Democratico (PD), Italy’s main centre-left political party, ought to field the ex-director of the Italian bishops’ newspaper as a candidate in the upcoming European elections. Marco Tarquinio is a prominent journalist, well respected across the political spectrum. He has, however, been making headlines with his staunch defence of the Pope’s position on the war in Ukraine. (In fact, he often goes beyond Francis’ calls for urgent ceasefire negotiations – in an infamous TV interview, he said that “If Zelenskiy had packed his bags ... the war would already be over”). Elly Schlein, the leader of the PD, has made it very clear that she supports military aid to Ukraine, and questions are being asked about whether she can field a candidate who

dissents so thoroughly from the party line.

It’s not just Tarquinio’s views on Ukraine that have stoked controversy, however. He’s also a vocal opponent of abortion, surrogacy and same-sex marriage, positions that have caused concern amongst a number of PD officials. This has tempted some observers to interpret the ongoing controversy about his candidacy as a sort of litmus test for the future of the Catholic left in Italy – is it still possible for a believer with traditional views on these hot-button issues to run for office with a left-wing party?

To an extent, this is a fair reading. It is important not to ignore, however, that Pope Francis’ papacy has created new opportunities for collaboration with left-wing politicians who have no time for the Church’s stance on sexual morality. Schlein, the leader of the PD, is a case in point. Secular and openly bisexual, she has spoken of her admiration for the Pope, and frequently voices her agreement with him on issues from climate change to the war in Gaza.

**THERE’S NO COUNTRY** in the world, I’m sure, where the Church gets as much mainstream media coverage as Italy. It’s almost impossible to watch the television news or scan a major newspaper without seeing at least one story about the Pope or the Vatican. Journalists use the abbreviation “CEI”, for the Italian bishops’ conference, without any clarification. (Can you imagine “CBCEW” featuring in a BBC headline?)

At first, when one arrives in Italy from a country like the UK, where religious illiteracy in the media is almost a given, it’s easy to be impressed by this. The longer I’ve lived here, though, the more I’ve come to see the drawbacks of the Church’s major institutional role in Italian society. Italians are increasingly secular and the disconnect between the Church’s political relevance (still substantial) and its importance in the life of the average citizen (increasingly minimal) gives rise to cynicism and even resentment. This is not to say that its role on the national stage is negative – the Italian Church does a huge amount of indispensable social work. Ultimately, though, I’m convinced by Tomáš Halík’s thesis that the collapse of the institutional Church is inevitable. For the Czech theologian, the question is not whether the Church can hang on to the significant role it still enjoys in countries like Italy (it can’t), but how it will be reborn once it loses all relevance. That seems right to me. Just don’t tell the journalists here.

Joseph Tulloch is a writer and journalist based in Rome.