News



A formation of fighter jets emit trails in the Vatican colors of yellow and white before a Feb. 4, 2019, welcoming ceremony for Pope Francis at the entrance to the presidential palace in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates. (CNS/Paul Haring)



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ABU DHABI, United Arab Emirates — February 4, 2019

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Pope Francis urged religious leaders to renounce all forms of support for violence Feb. 4, using the first papal address on the Arabian Peninsula to call it a "duty" of the world's faiths to reject "every nuance of approval" for war.

In a speech to hundreds of Muslim, Christian, Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist and Sikh representatives at an interreligious conference here, the pope likewise lamented ongoing conflicts across the Middle East.

He specifically named the war in Yemen, where UAE is taking part in a coalition led by Saudi Arabia. The United Nations has said that war crimes may have been committed by the coalition in the fight against the Houthi movement, an Islamic religious and political armed movement that emerged in the 1990s in Yemen.

"War cannot create anything but misery; weapons bring nothing but death!" Francis proclaimed to the crowd, gathered at The Founder's Memorial, an outdoor memorial dedicated to UAE's first president.

"Human fraternity requires of us, as representatives of the world's religions, the duty to reject every nuance of approval from the word 'war,' " he said. "Let us return it to its miserable crudeness."

"Its fateful consequences are before our eyes," he continued. "I am thinking in particular of Yemen, Syria, Iraq and Libya."

Francis is the first pope to come to the Arabian Peninsula and the first to visit the UAE. He will be in the country through Feb. 5 to take part in an interreligious conference and to encourage its Catholic faithful, a migrant worker community that makes up about a 10th of the 9.3 million population.

The conference is being sponsored by the UAE-based Muslim Council of Elders, which is seeking to counter extremism by promoting a moderate brand of Islam. The council's chairman is Sheikh Ahmed el-Tayeb, the grand imam of Egypt's al-Azhar, considered the highest theological and instructional institution of Sunni Islam.

Much speculation ahead of Francis' voyage had centered on whether the pope would risk angering his hosts by speaking publicly about UAE's role in Yemen, or would perhaps only mention the subject in his private meeting with de facto ruler and

Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed.

That meeting, held earlier Feb. 4 at the newly built, opulent $490 million Gulf Coast presidential palace, took place shortly after an official welcome ceremony that featured a jet flyover, military bagpipers and a salute from a sword-carrying regiment wearing traditional khaki-colored dishdasha tunics.

The Vatican did not release any information about Francis and bin Zayed's private encounter beyond the pope's message in the palace's guestbook expressing gratitude to the prince and the hope that his country would experience "divine blessings of peace and fraternal solidarity."

Regional experts had expected before the visit that Francis might shy away from speaking about Yemen or other controversial topics such as religious freedom in his public events.

"It's a very delicate business because if his remarks are interpreted as simply critical of a Muslim country, then they could backfire," said Gabriel Reynolds, a professor of Islamic studies and theology at Notre Dame University who took part in a 2016 Vatican delegation to al-Azhar that prepared the way for Francis' 2017 visit to Egypt.

But Francis appeared unafraid of criticism during his Feb. 4 speech. He raised a number of possibly controversial subjects, including discrimination against non-Muslims, rights of citizenship for migrants and educational systems that radicalize young people.

Although UAE is known for being fairly tolerant among its Gulf neighbors, the Christian community, made up primarily of Indian and Filipino workers, faces a number of difficult obstacles.

Because migrants are unable to gain citizenship — thus unable to buy land — there are only eight parishes for some 900,000 Catholic worshippers. Evangelization is also strictly controlled.

The pope began his address by noting that this year marks the 800th anniversary of St. Francis of Assisi's meeting with Sultan Malik al-Kamil, the 13th century Kurdish ruler of the area of Egypt. Like the saint, the pope said he had come as "a believer thirsting for peace, as a brother seeking peace with the brethren."

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Francis then denounced religious violence, saying: "In the name of God the Creator ... every form of violence must be condemned without hesitation."

"We gravely profane God’s name when we use it to justify hatred and violence against a brother or sister," he said. "No violence can be justified in the name of religion."

He also called for the religions to give witness to reconciliation, saying: "We will either build the future together or there will not be a future."

"Religions ... cannot renounce the urgent task of building bridges between peoples and cultures," the pope said.

"The time has come when religions should more actively exert themselves, with courage and audacity, and without pretense, to help the human family deepen the capacity for reconciliation, the vision of hope and the concrete paths of peace," he said.

Francis mentioned the citizenship issue for Christians in the wider context of the Middle East. He said he is looking for "societies where people of different beliefs have the same right of citizenship and where only in the case of violence in any of its forms is that right removed."

At the end of the address, he appealed for religions to renounce all support for war, saying the world is facing a "delicate historical situation" and religions are called to "contribute actively to demilitarizing the human heart."

"Together, as brothers and sisters in the one human family willed by God, let us commit ourselves against the logic of armed power, against the monetization of relations, the arming of borders, the raising of walls, the gagging of the poor," Francis said.

"God is with those who seek peace," he said. "From heaven he blesses every step which, on this path, is accomplished on earth."



Pope Francis poses for a photo with Sheik Ahmad el-Tayeb, grand imam of Egypt's al-Azhar mosque and university, before a Feb. 4 meeting with members of the Muslim Council of Elders in the Sheik Zayed Grand Mosque in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates. (CNS/Paul Haring)

'Friend and dear brother'

Francis spoke at the conclusion of the interreligious event, which was centered on the theme of "human fraternity."

The number of delegates taking part was vast, including the secretaries general of the Arab League, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, the World Council of Churches and the World Conference of Religions for Peace.

Also taking part were the presidents of the World Methodist Council and Won Buddhist International, along with several chief rabbis and grand muftis.

The pope has now met Egypt's imam el-Tayeb, one of the principal organizers of the event, on five separate occasions. The two appear to have a good rapport. In a video message ahead of his visit to Abu Dhabi, Francis called el-Tayeb his "friend and dear brother."

Reynolds, the theologian, said the two religious leaders both gain from their friendly relationship.

The imam, he said, gains "the opportunity of presenting himself as de facto the leader of the Sunni Islamic world." And the pope is able to have "a real dialogue partner" in his efforts to stress that religions should be "a source of peace and not conflict."

"My sense is that both see advantages in the relationship," said Reynolds. "And I don't doubt that there's sincere personal warmth between them."

In his own address Feb. 4, el-Tayeb echoed many of Francis' sentiments. The imam lamented the number of conflicts around the world and condemned what he called the "instrumentalization" of religion to support violence.

Terrorism, said el-Tayeb, "has nothing to do with theology."

"Terrorists are ... people who commit violence against God," he said. "We have a responsibility to confront them, to stop them and to defend places of worship, to defend our people against the crimes of these terrorists."

Later in the speech, el-Tayeb appealed directly to fellow followers of Islam.

"I would like to address my fellow Muslims in the east," he said. "My message to you is to embrace your Christian brothers and sisters. They are companions."

"The Qur'an speaks of priests and brothers," he said. "Christians are filled with mercy. God himself placed mercy in their hearts."

At the end of their respective speeches, Francis and el-Tayeb signed a five-page document committing themselves to working to support efforts that encourage human fraternity.

The document, which was formally presented in Arabic and Italian, calls on world leaders to "stop the shedding of innocent blood and bring an end to wars." It likewise condemns the funding of terrorist movements.



Pope Francis attends a Feb. 4 welcoming ceremony with Sheik Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, vice president and prime minister of the United Arab Emirates and ruler of Dubai, at the entrance to the presidential palace in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates. (CNS/Paul Haring)

'Permanent impermanence'

Francis' visit to Abu Dhabi is to continue Feb. 5 with a celebration of Mass at a local sports stadium, which may be the first public celebration of Mass in the modern era on the entire Arabian Peninsula.

Organizers are expecting more that 130,000 people to take part and local authorities have declared the day a holiday for the occasion.

Brandon Vaidyanathan, an Indian sociologist who spent four years of his youth in Dubai and has focused some of his research on the UAE church, said Francis will be encountering a Catholic community that lives in a state of "permanent impermanence."

Because migrants have no path to citizenship in the country, anxiety is deep-seated, said Vaidyanathan, associate professor and chair of the department of sociology at the Catholic University of America.

"The anxiety of just not knowing — five years from now will I be allowed to stay in this country, or will they cancel my visa? — it is precarious," he said.

"It's an unusual way of living the sense of being pilgrims and sojourners," he said. "You know you're in a foreign land and you're not at home and in some sense you're not wanted. That's a deep part of the psyche of someone in that environment."

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