Vatican

Francis, the comic strip



Pope Francis arrives for his Feb. 6 general audience in Paul VI hall at the Vatican. (CNS/Reuters/Max Rossi)

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Pope Francis said his recent visit to the United Arab Emirates, while brief, was a new page in relations between Christians and Muslims at a time when conflict and violence threaten the goal of lasting peace.

Recalling his Feb. 3-5 visit to Abu Dhabi, the pope said during his weekly general audience Feb. 6 that the joint document signed by him and Egyptian Sheik Ahmed el-Tayeb, the grand imam of al-Azhar and chair of the Muslim Council of Elders, was a step forward in promoting dialogue and brotherhood.

"In an age like ours, in which there is a strong temptation to see a clash between Christian and Islamic civilizations taking place, and also to consider religions as sources of conflict, we wanted to give another clear and decisive sign that, on the contrary, it is possible to meet, respect and dialogue with each other, and that, despite the diversity of cultures and traditions, the Christian and Islamic worlds appreciate and protect common values: life, the family, religious belief, honor for the elderly, the education of young people and much more," the pope said.

Arriving at the Paul VI audience hall, the pope was in good spirits despite recently returning from the quick two-day visit. A group of pilgrims from Paraguay was the first to greet him, offering him "chipa," a cheese-flavored breakfast snack from their country.

The pope snacked on the treat while greeting them. He later washed it down with some mate tea offered to him by an Argentine pilgrim attending the audience.

In his talk, the pope reflected on the historic nature of his visit, which was the first time a pope visited the Arabian Peninsula. He also noted that 800 years after St. Francis of Assisi's visit to Sultan al-Malik al-Kamil, providence wanted "a pope named Francis" to fulfill this visit.

"I often thought of St. Francis during this visit," the pope said. "He helped me to keep in my heart the Gospel, the love of Jesus Christ, while I lived the various moments of the visit."

Among the prayers he kept in his heart, he added, were the "victims of injustices, wars, and misery" as well as "the prayer that the dialogue between Christianity and Islam be a decisive factor for peace in the world today."

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After expressing his gratitude to Abu Dhabi's crown prince, Sheik Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan and the country's authorities for their welcome, the pope thanked the Catholic community "who animate the Christian presence in that land."

Departing from his prepared remarks, the pope recalled meeting the first priest to arrive in Abu Dhabi and who "founded so many communities there."

At 90 years old, he said, the priest "is in a wheelchair, blind, but his smile never falls from his lips, a smile of having served the Lord, of having done good."

This visit, Francis said, "belongs to God's 'surprises.' Let us praise him and his providence, and let us pray that the seeds sown may bear fruit according to his holy will."