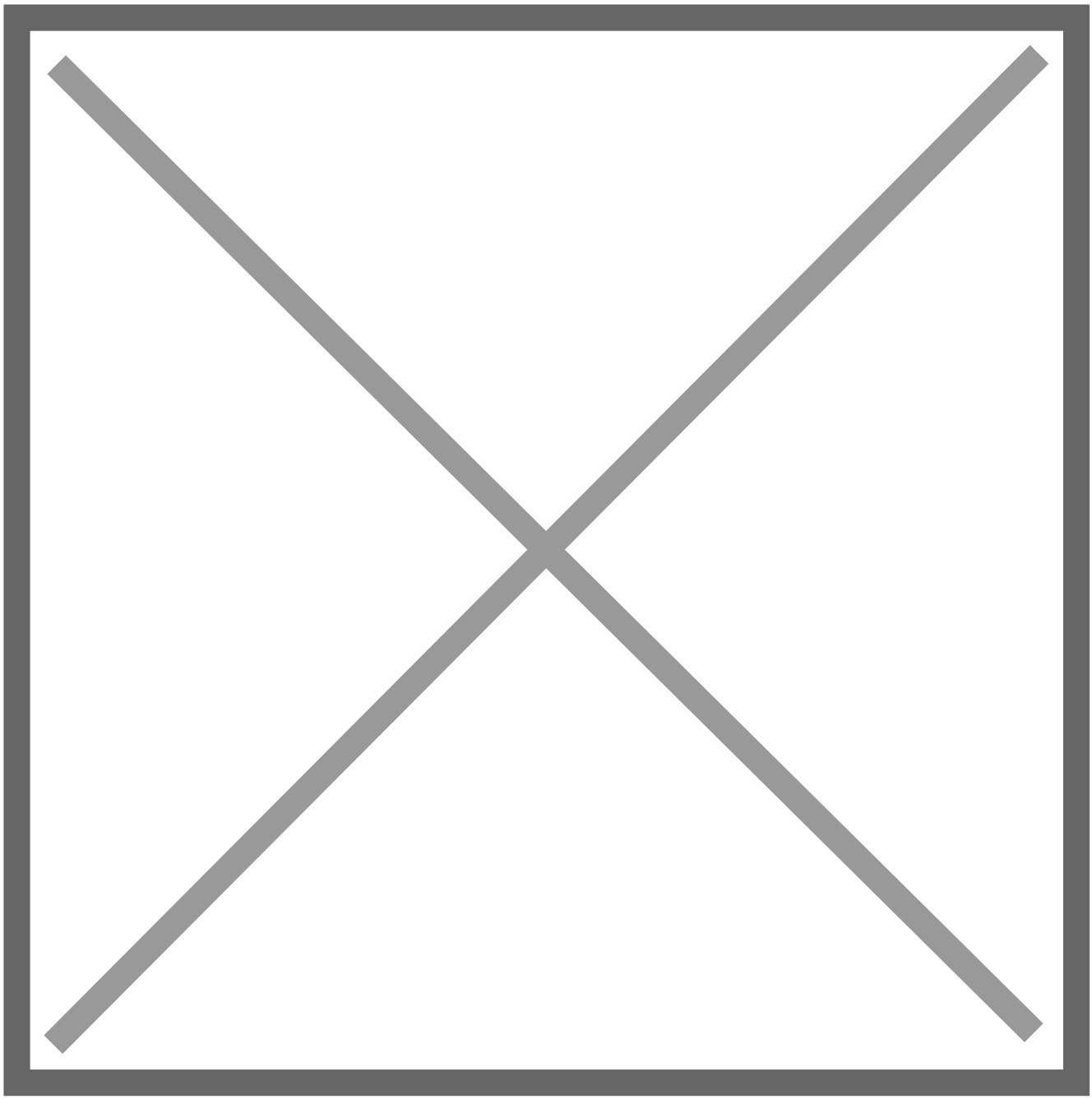
Vatican



Pope Francis addresses the opening and plenary sessions of the Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions at the Palace of Peace and Reconciliation in Nur-Sultan, Kazakhstan, Sept. 14, 2022. (CNS photo/Paul Haring)



by Christopher White

Former Vatican Correspondent (2021-2025)

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

September 14, 2022

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

NUR-SULTAN, Kazakhstan — Pope Francis on Sept. 14 warned against the perversion of religion by power and corruption, telling a global gathering of interfaith leaders that "authentic religiosity" is a necessary building block for world peace.

"Mindful of the wrongs and errors of the past, let us unite our efforts to ensure that the Almighty will never again be held hostage to the human thirst for power," said Francis during the second of his three-day visit to the Central Asian country of Kazakhstan.

"It is time to realize that fundamentalism defiles and corrupts every creed," he continued. "It is also time to consign to the history books the kind of talk that for all too long, here and elsewhere, has led to distrust and contempt for religion, as if it were a destabilizing force in modern society."

The pope's words came just one day after he used his opening remarks in the country — which shares its entire northern border with the Russian Federation — to condemn the war against Ukraine.

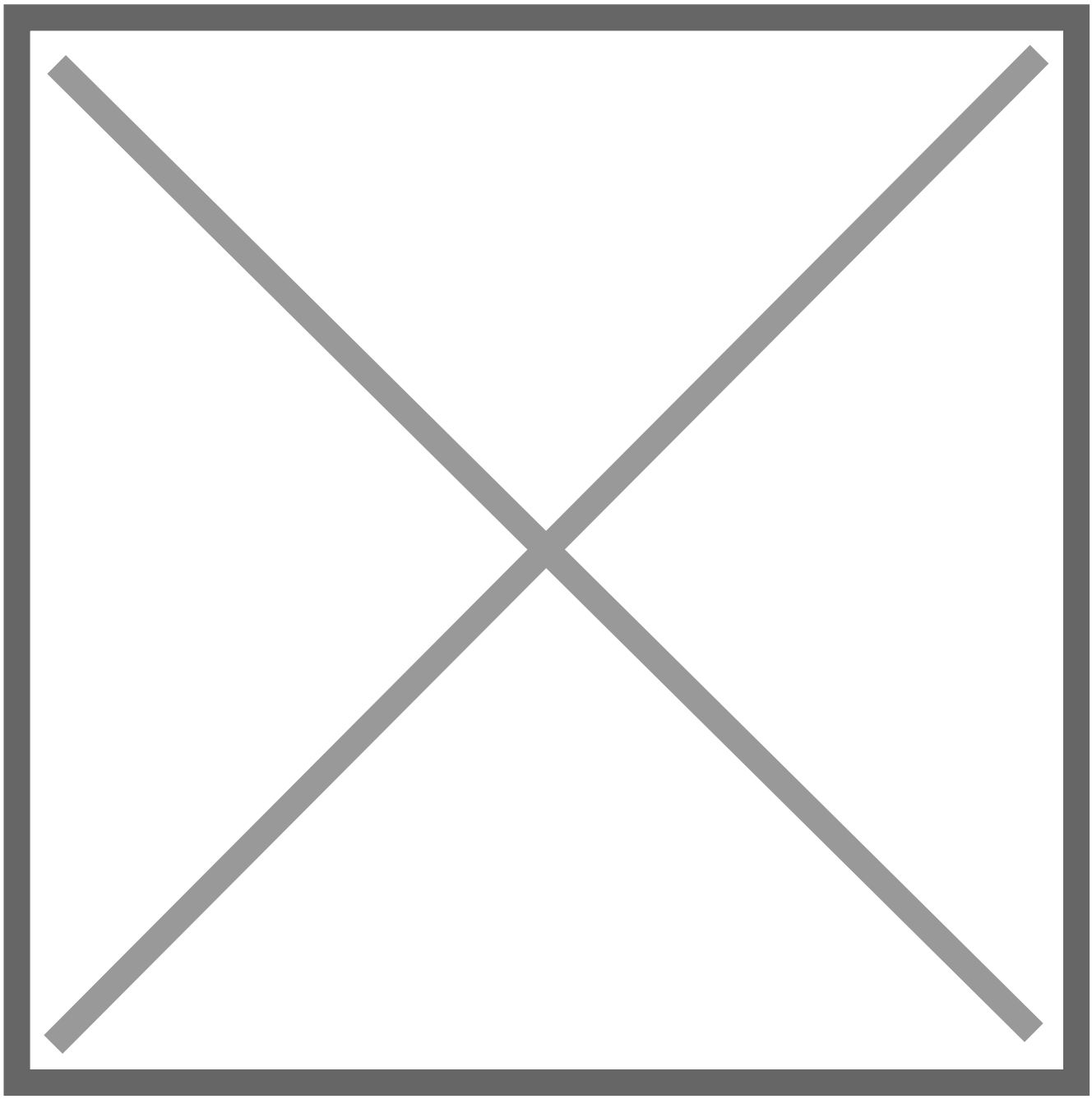
In a room of religious leaders that was originally meant to include Russian Orthodox Patriarch Kirill, a prominent defender of the war who has often used religious language to justify its invasion of the country, the pope said faith leaders should

never "justify violence."

"May we never allow the sacred to be exploited by the profane," Francis said. "The sacred must never be a prop for power, nor power a prop for the sacred!"

"God is peace. He guides us always in the way of peace, never that of war," he added.

Francis' address came during the opening session of the 7th Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions, where nearly 100 faith leaders from 50 countries are participating in a two-day Sept. 14-15 summit here in the Kazakh capital. The diverse group of leaders gathered around a monumental roundtable in Nur-Sultan's Palace of Independence, where they began the morning in a collective silent prayer.



Pope Francis attends the opening and plenary sessions of the Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions at the Palace of Peace and Reconciliation in Nur-Sultan, Kazakhstan, Sept. 14, 2022. (CNS photo/Paul Haring)

The conference, which began in the aftermath of the Sept. 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States and takes place every three years, is meant to aid in resisting extremism and fostering harmony among religious traditions.

This year's gathering is being attended by Islamic, Jewish, Buddhist, Orthodox Christian, Protestant, and traditional religious representatives, along with a delegation of Russian Orthodox participants.

Francis told the representatives that they are all "children of the same heaven" and urged religious leaders to be on the "frontlines, as promoters of unity amid the grave challenges that risk dividing our human family even further."

In a country that just under a century ago had banished every Catholic priest from its borders as a member of the Soviet Union, the pope reflected on "the legacy of decades of state-imposed atheism" that lead to persecution, oppression and even death for adherents to any faith.

"Religion is not a problem, but part of the solution for a more harmonious life in society," he told them. "We need religion, in order to respond to the thirst for world peace and the thirst for the infinite that dwells in the heart of each man and woman."

Advertisement

The pope went on to offer a full-throated defense of religious freedom, saying that it "may not be restricted merely to freedom of worship," while also warning against proselytizing.

"Each person has the right to render public testimony to his or her own creed, proposing it without ever imposing it," he urged. "This is the correct method of preaching, as opposed to proselytism and indoctrination, from which all are called to step back."

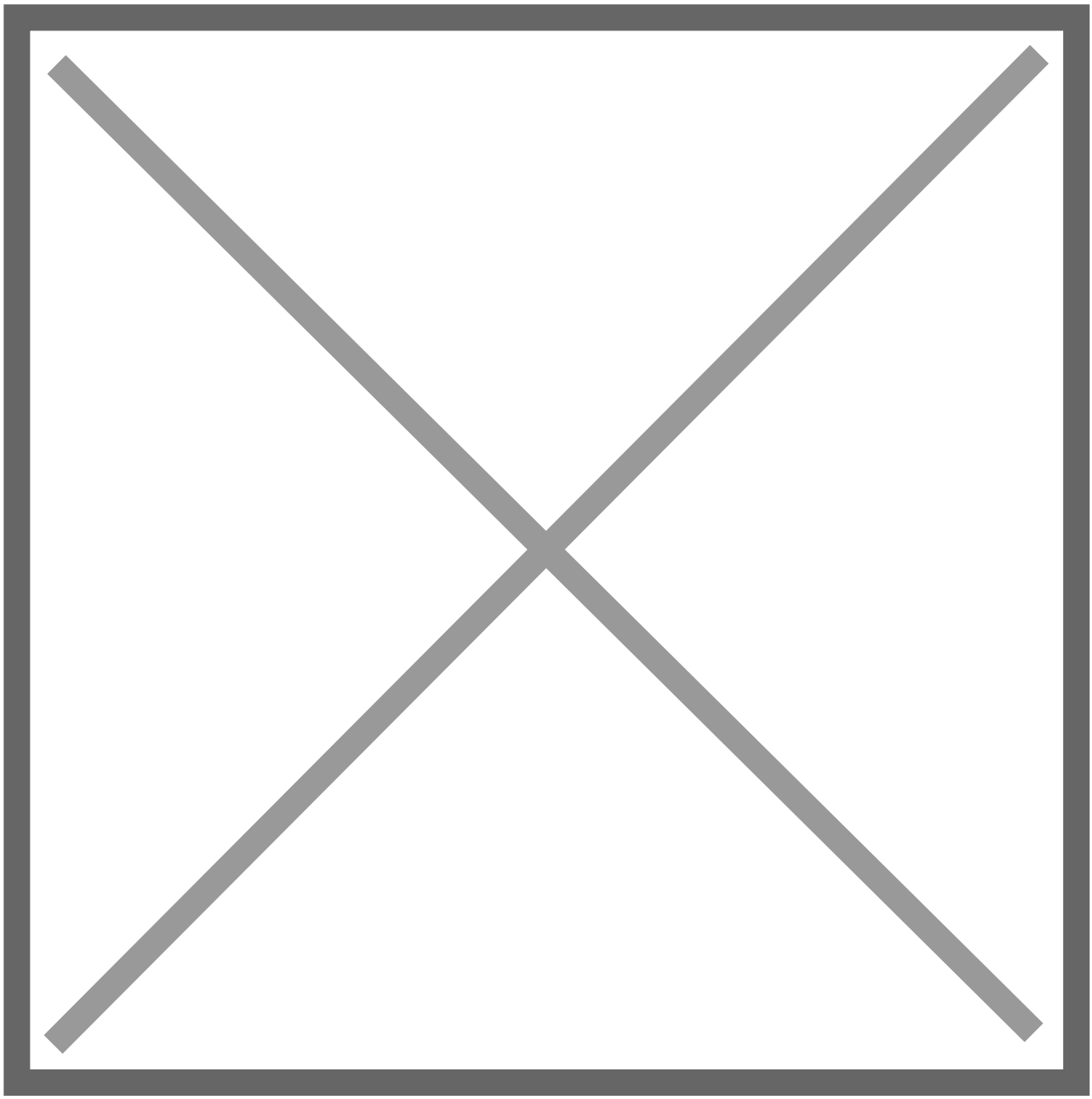
Reflecting on the theme of this year's congress, which is centered on how religion can help the world emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic, Francis said it was the role of faith leaders to be "prophetic and courageous voices of conscience."

"Let us show ourselves neighbors to all, but especially to those most neglected in our time: the disinherited, the poor and the helpless, and those who suffer in silence and general disregard," he said, noting that included promoting access to vaccines, care for the environment and a rejection of technological and economic solutions that fail to put the human person in the center of development.

"Each day children, born and unborn, migrants and elderly persons, are cast aside," the pope said. "Many of our brothers and sisters die sacrificed on the altar of profit, amid clouds of the sacrilegious incense of indifference. Yet every human being is sacred."

"Yet it is our duty to be mindful that the Creator, who watches over each of his creatures, exhorts us to regard others as he does, and in them to see the face of a brother or a sister," said the pope.

Following the Congress, Francis celebrated an outdoor Mass for the one-percent minority population of Catholics in the Muslim-majority country. Some 6,000 pilgrims took part.



Pope Francis greets the crowd before celebrating Mass at the Expo grounds in Nur-Sultan, Kazakhstan, Sept. 14, 2022. (CNS photo/Paul Haring)

The pope encouraged the small Catholic community in Central Asia to live harmoniously alongside others.

“Being a Christian," he said, "means living without venom: not biting one another, not complaining, blaming and backbiting, not disseminating evil, not polluting the

earth with the sin and distrust that comes from the evil one."

Ahead of the Mass, one pilgrim from neighboring Kyrgyzstan told NCR that he had traveled to Kazakhstan for the "once in a lifetime" opportunity to see the pope.

"It makes us feel special, beautiful," said 36-year-old Dmitry (who did not give his last name).

Also in attendance was 48-year-old Roberto Santos who moved to Kazakhstan a decade ago from his native Brazil for work.

He noted the stark difference between his homeland — the most Catholic country in the world — to now being a part of a tiny minority, where most of the Catholic community hails from other places.

Even so, he told NCR, the country remains deeply religious, even with people coming from a variety of faiths, which he said allows for mutual understanding.

"We all believe in God," he said.

Editor's Note: *This story was updated after initial publication to include more detail about Pope Francis' events in Kazakhstan on Sept. 14.*

This story appears in the **Pope Francis in Kazakhstan** feature series. View the full series.