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Pope Francis answers a question from a journalist aboard his flight back to Rome from Marseille, France, Sept. 23, after his two-day trip there. (CNS/Vatican Media)



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ABOARD THE PAPAL FLIGHT FROM MARSEILLE — September 23, 2023

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Returning from a two-day trip meant to underscore the mounting challenges of global migration, Pope Francis on Sept. 23 condemned the treatment of migrants like "hot potatoes" or "ping pongs."

"You can't send them back like ping pongs," said Francis, criticizing how new arrivals get shuffled from place to place as countries refuse to allow them entry.

The pope's comments came during an unusually brief, 18-minute inflight press conference following an overnight visit to the French port city of Marseille, where he participated in a major migration summit with Catholic bishops and young people from more than 30 countries from around the Mediterranean.

During the trip, the pope offered some of his strongest statements on migration in several years, denouncing the "fanaticism of indifference" toward new arrivals. His visit occurred just weeks after a new wave of migrants from North Africa set off a furious debate among European leaders over how to respond.

While France has doubled down and said it would not accept any new migrants, the pope warned that civilization is at a crossroads and must choose whether to respond with apathy or fraternity.



People display a "tifo," a veil with Pope Francis' image, before his Mass at the Vélodrome Stadium in Marseille, France, Sept. 23. About 50,000 attended the Mass. (CNS/Lola Gomez)

During his remarks earlier in the day, the pope made an impassioned case for a renewed commitment to human dignity — linking abortion, euthanasia and concern for migrants and refugees. At a speech attended by French President Emmanuel Macron, Francis explicitly criticized the practice of medically assisted suicide, just one week before Macron's cabinet will consider legislation that would legalize the practice in France.

Asked whether he discussed the issue directly with Macron during their private meeting on Sept. 23, the pope said they did not, but said the two men had discussed it during an earlier encounter at the Vatican.

Francis emphasized that his position is clear: "You don't play with life."

"This is an ugly compassion," the pope said, recalling accounts of terminally ill children and the elderly being euthanized.

"We cannot play with life, both with the baby in the womb of a mother and also with euthanasia," he continued. "It's not just my opinion."



People cheer as Pope Francis arrives in the popemobile to celebrate Mass at the Vélodrome Stadium in Marseille, France, Sept. 23. (CNS/Lola Gomez)

Francis also told reporters that he continues to be "frustrated" by the ongoing war in Ukraine, where the Vatican has repeatedly tried to serve as a peacemaker, but has largely been rebuffed.

Earlier this month, Italian Cardinal Matteo Zuppi — who Francis tapped this summer to lead the Vatican's peace efforts and has since traveled to Kyiv, Moscow and Washington, D.C., on the pope's behalf — returned from Beijing where he specifically discussed plans to help restart the transport of Ukrainian grain to developing nations.

The pope repeated his ongoing concerns for the "martyred people" of Ukraine and said that he was under no illusions about the possibility of a quick détente between the warring nations.

"With war, what's realistic is possible," he said. "Don't fool yourselves thinking tomorrow they will have breakfast together," he said, before adding that there are measures that can be taken to ease the suffering, such as the Vatican's efforts to aid in the return of Ukrainian children kidnapped by Russia. On that front, the pope offered a glimmer of hope, saying "it's going well."

The pope, who was completing his 44th international trip, then told reporters that he would continue to take questions on his next trip — though the 86-year-old pontiff did not specify when that might be.

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Late on Saturday afternoon, Francis concluded his flash visit to Marseille by celebrating a Mass in the country's second largest sports arena.

Despite France's reputation as a deeply secularized country, the pope seemed to electrify the crowd of some 50,000 Mass attendees as he toured the stadium in the popemobile before the Mass, and the more than 100,000 people who lined the streets of Marseille to greet him as he made his way to the stadium.

During his homily, the pope drilled down on his message that Christians must be known for their compassion and mercy toward others, offering a final push to convince the traditionally Catholic country that hospitality toward strangers must be a defining hallmark of Christian life.

"We need to rekindle our passion and enthusiasm, to reawaken our desire to commit ourselves to fraternity," he said. "We want to be Christians who encounter God in prayer, and our brothers and sisters in love … [and] to be set afire by the questions of our day, by the challenges of the Mediterranean, by the cry of the poor."

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