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People react as Pope Francis arrives for Mass in Jakarta, Indonesia, Sept. 5, 2024. (AP/Tatan Syuflana)



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Jakarta, Indonesia — September 5, 2024

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"Sometimes we have to scream to show our existence," said 27-year-old Laura Brigitta of Jakarta, describing the challenges of being a Catholic in Muslim-majority Indonesia.

An hour later, she was screaming for a different reason as Pope Francis entered the city's Gelora Bung Karno soccer stadium, and the 87-year-old pontiff received an exuberant welcome here on Sept. 5 during a papal Mass on the third day of his closely watched 12-day visit to Asia and Oceania.

"This is what it means to be Catholic, to be together," said Brigitta as she surveyed the more than 100,000 Catholics gathered inside the stadium and a nearby overflow arena to greet the pope. "Indonesia needs his presence."



A woman wears a pope-themed headband as she awaits Mass with Pope Francis at the Gelora Bung Karno Stadium in Jakarta, Indonesia, Sept. 5. (CNS/Lola Gomez)

There were the traditional shouts of "*Viva il Papa!*" as the pope made his way around the arena to the sounds of pulsing music and the usual fanfare that meets Francis when he travels the globe.

Except in a country of 280 million, where Catholics make up just 3% of the population, everything about the visit of the head of the Catholic Church to their country felt unusual for Brigitta and many pilgrims like her gathered here for the Mass.

"It's always been my dream to visit Rome to get the blessing of the pope, but now he's come," she continued. "I don't have to touch him, I feel blessed already."

But when Francis brought the enthused crowd to a near silence as he delivered his homily, he told the resilient Catholics who waited hours for his arrival — and endured Jakarta's punishing humidity — not to abandon their dreams, even if they are at times disappointed or feel inadequate.

"Do not grow weary of dreaming and building again a civilization of peace!" the pope told them. "Always dare to dream of fraternity!"

Since his arrival here in Jakarta on Sept. 3, Francis has repeatedly extolled the long history of Catholics and Muslims living harmoniously alongside one another and encouraged them to see their differences as a strength. And prior to celebrating Mass, he visited the largest mosque in southeast Asia to sign a joint declaration with its grand imam calling on religious leaders to band together to defend human dignity, fight climate change and build social solidarity.

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He repeated that plea during the Sept. 5 service, this time speaking directly to the country's Catholics.

"Guided by the word of the Lord, I encourage you to sow seeds of love, confidently tread the path of dialogue, continue to show your goodness and kindness with your

characteristic smile and be builders of unity and peace," the pope said.

Erwin Arifin took in the scene and acknowledged that it might not be "what most of the world thinks of when they think of a Muslim country."

But, the 29-year-old Jesuit boys school graduate said, it represented everything that he thinks both Catholicism and Indonesia should be about.

"We are walking proof that so many people of different backgrounds can live together," he said.



People cheer as Pope Francis arrives at the Gelora Bung Karno Stadium in Jakarta, Indonesia, to celebrate Mass Sept. 5. The pope will next visit Papau New Guinea as part of a 12-day trip to to Asia and Oceania. (CNS/Lola Gomez)

Daisy Joham, 53, who traveled to the Indonesian capital from West Java, said her reason for making the trek was simple: "I want to see my father."

"This is a very big moment for us," she continued, describing the unlikely occasion of so many Catholics gathered in one place. "It gives us hope."

And as Francis concluded his homily — and prepared to conclude his visit here and depart tomorrow for Papua New Guinea — he encouraged the country's Catholics to keep the faith.

"Be builders of hope," the pope told the crowd, "the hope of the Gospel, which does not disappoint but instead opens us up to endless joy."

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