Vatican

Vatican News



People greet Pope Francis as he travels in a car on way to the Presidential Palace in Dili, East Timor, Monday, Sept. 9. (AP photo/Firdia Lisnawati)



by Christopher White

Former Vatican Correspondent (2021-2025)

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

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

DILI, East Timor — September 9, 2024

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

Pope Francis on Sept. 9 arrived on the small island of East Timor where he issued a broad condemnation of abuse, but stopped short of specifically addressing the church's complicated record on clergy sex abuse in a nation that is the most Catholic country in the world, outside of the Vatican.

"Let us also not forget that ... children and adolescents have their dignity violated," said the pope at a meeting with government officials just hours after his arrival. "In response, we are all called to do everything possible to prevent every kind of abuse and guarantee a healthy and peaceful childhood for all young people."

Here in the former Portuguese colony, Catholicism remains a vibrant force on the island — as was evidenced by the tens of thousands who had taken to the streets of the capital to give Francis an ebullient hero's welcome.

The pontiff's Sept. 9-11 visit during his two-week tour of Asia and Oceania has been widely seen as a chance to celebrate that dynamism and encourage its recovery efforts after the nation's bloody fight for independence, but sex abuse revelations involving some of the country's most storied clergy have loomed large over this visit.

Nearly 98% of the population of East Timor identifies as Catholic and its most celebrated prelate, Bishop Carlos Ximenes Belo, was a major figure in the independence movement, garnering him a Nobel Peace Prize in 1996.



Retired East Timorese Bishop Carlos Filipe Ximenes Belo, center, speaks at a March 26, 2007, news conference in Jakarta, Indonesia. The Nobel Peace Prize winner has been accused of sexual abuse of minors. (CNS/Reuters/Dadang Tri)

Belo retired for alleged health reasons in 2002, but a shocking 2022 Dutch newspaper report revealed his long history of sexual abuse of teenage boys. The Vatican later confirmed that it secretly sanctioned the bishop and that he had been sent to live in Portugal and placed under travel restrictions.

But here on this island where Catholic priests are intensely revered — and the church is deeply entangled in government relations — most Timorese Catholics refuse to believe the charges against their former bishop and are unwilling to confront the broader realities of clergy abuse.

In an interview earlier this month with The Associated Press, East Timor's President José Ramos-Horta — a close ally of Belo's with whom he was jointly awarded the

Nobel Peace Prize — insisted that the pope's visit is not the time to confront the church's record on abuse in the country.

The Timorese, he said, "continue to deeply respect Bishop Belo for his courage, his contribution to their struggle. He sheltered people, he saved people and people don’t just forget that … or castigate him, ostracize him."

And in his first official remarks in the country — with the country's president seated next to him — Francis chose not to publicly push the issue much further, neither offering an apology nor specifically addressing abuse within the context of the church.



Pope Francis and President of Timor-Leste José Ramos-Horta share a laugh during a welcome ceremony at the presidential palace, Sept. 9 in Dili, Timor-Leste. (CNS/Lola Gomez)

Instead, the pope heralded the restoration of their independence from Indonesia, which was officially declared in 2002, and praised the Timorese for their

perseverance during the nearly 25-year struggle in which some 25% of the population is estimated to have been killed.

"Yet, the country has been able to rise again, finding a path to peace and the beginning of a new phase of development, of improved living conditions and of appreciation on all levels of the unspoiled splendor of this land and its natural and human resources," said the pope.

Throughout his opening remarks, Francis lauded the country for its deep faith that he said had motivated many of its traditions and practices. In particular, he praised the "assiduous efforts" of the Timorese to reconcile with their Indonesian neighbors and live in harmony, which he said was made possible due to their commitment to the Gospel.

Advertisement

With 65% of the population under the age of 30, Francis focused his remarks primarily on the future, encouraging a greater investment in education, a wise economic stewardship of its vast oil and gas reserves and an ongoing commitment to peace and democracy.

"Looking at your recent past and what has been accomplished so far, there is reason to be confident that your nation will likewise be able to face intelligently and creatively the difficulties and problems of today," said the pope speaking in his native Spanish.

Francis has been greeted with tremendous fanfare since his arrival in the seaside capital where residents climbed atop buildings and flocked to the streets to see his motorcade. Even the Prime Minister was seen sweeping the streets on Monday in order to ready the city for the pope. The 87-year-old Francis is undertaking the longest trip of his papacy and has exhibited remarkable vigor during his previous stops in Indonesia and Papua New Guinea.

But here on the ground in Dili, the pontiff's own energy is being more than matched by the throngs of people that are expected to continue to turnout to welcome him over the next two days, culminating with a Mass on Sept. 10 that is expected to draw crowds of over 750,000 attendees — more than half the country's population.

This story appears in the **Francis in Asia and Oceania** feature series. View the full series.