Vatican
Vatican News



Pope Francis listens to a question from a journalist aboard his flight back to Rome Sept. 13, after visiting Indonesia, Papua New Guinea, Timor-Leste (or East Timor) and Singapore. It was his 45th and longest foreign trip. (CNS/Lola Gomez)



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ON BOARD THE PAPAL PLANE FROM SINGAPORE — September 13, 2024
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Pope Francis on Sept. 13 said both U.S. Vice President Kamala Harris and former President Donald Trump hold positions that are "against life" due to their respective stances on abortion and immigration and called on Catholics to use their conscience to discern which candidate to vote for in November's presidential election.

"They are both against life. The one who throws away the migrants as well as the one who kills children," said the pope. "Both are against life."

The pope's remarks came during a nearly 45-minute press conference en route back to Rome following a 12-day, four-country tour through Asia and Oceania, which was the longest and farthest trip of his papacy to date.

In response to a reporter's question on how Catholics should decide between a candidate who supports abortion rights and another who has pledged mass deportation of migrants, the pontiff insisted he could not tell Catholics how to vote and that "everyone with a conscience should think on this and do it."

Francis went on to deliver both an impassioned defense of migrants and against abortion, saying it is "evil" and a "sin" to reject migrants and describing abortion as an "assassination." Recalling the words of the Old Testament, the pope said it is incumbent to care for "the orphan, the stranger and the widow."

The pope's rejection of single-issue voting — while consistent with his previous teachings on how Catholics should engage in political life — stands in contrast to the official position of the U.S. bishops' conference that declares abortion to be the "preeminent priority" for Catholic voters.

"One must choose the lesser of two evils. Who is the lesser of two evils? That lady or that gentleman?" he asked. "I don't know."



Former U.S. President Donald Trump, the Republican presidential candidate, and Democratic presidential candidate and U.S. Vice President Kamala Harris, are pictured in a combination photo taking part in the presidential debate at the National Constitution Center Sept. 10 in Philadelphia. (OSV News/Reuters/Brian Snyder)

On geopolitics: China, Gaza and Venezuela

Looming large in the background during the pope's travels to Asia was the question of China — a nation no pope has ever visited and with whom the Holy See in 2018 entered into a controversial agreement regarding the appointment of Catholic bishops in the country.

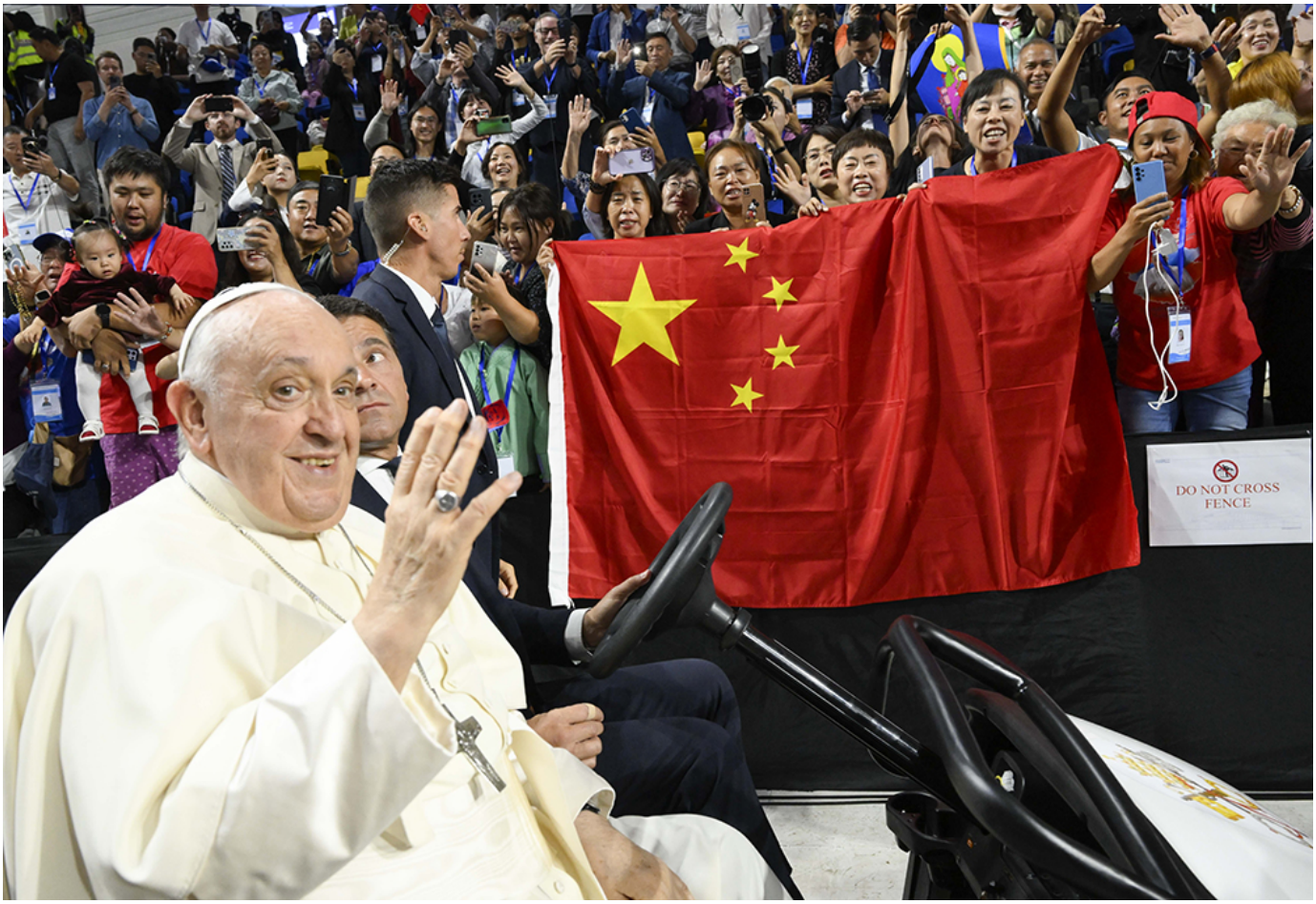
While the specifics of the agreement have never been made public, it broadly gives China the authority to select diocesan bishops, while allowing the pope a final authority to veto appointments by the Chinese Communist Party. Since entering the agreement, the Vatican has accused China of failing to honor the terms of the agreement and critics have claimed it has limited the Vatican from speaking out

about abuses of human rights and religious freedom in the country.

En route back to Rome, Francis told reporters he is "happy with the dialogue with China" and described the results of the Vatican-China agreement, which is up for renewal in October, as "good."

The pope reiterated that he would like to visit China — something some ethnic Chinese living in Singapore also expressed during the pope's visit — and said he believes "China is a promise and a hope for the church."

"It's a great country," said the pope. "I admire China, I respect China."



Pope Francis waves as people behind him raise a Chinese flag before the pope's Mass in Steppe Arena in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia, Sept. 3, 2023. At the end of the Mass, the pope sent greetings to China and to Chinese Catholics. (CNS/Vatican Media)

Ahead of next month's one-year anniversary of the Oct. 7, 2023, Hamas terrorists attacks against Israel and its subsequent war in Gaza, the pope said he regrets that he doesn't see any real path to peace at the moment, though he did single out the King of Jordan as a "man of peace" and praised his role in trying to end the conflict.

Francis said he did not know the particulars of recent Israeli bombing of a United Nations run school that killed at least 18 people, including six aid workers, which the Israeli military has maintained was not targeted at innocent civilians but at Hamas fighters.

"When you see the bodies of killed children … when you presume that there are fighters and you bomb a school," responded the pope, "All this is horrible, it's horrible."

Turning his attention to his native South America, the pope briefly weighed in on the devolving situation in Venezuela where incumbent President Nicolás Maduro declared himself the winner of a third term in office, despite a number of election concerns being raised by international observers. The crisis has sparked widespread protests throughout the country.

"The message I would give the government is: dialogue and make peace," said Francis. "A dictatorship serves no one and ends badly, before and after."



Pope Francis answers a question from a journalist aboard his flight back to Rome Sept. 13, after visiting Indonesia, Papua New Guinea, Timor-Leste (or East Timor) and Singapore. In response to one question, the pope said both candidates for U.S. president are "against life." (CNS/Lola Gomez)

Clergy sex abuse

During the pope's visit to East Timor, expectations were high that Francis would weigh-in on the high-profile case of Bishop Carlos Ximenes Belo, a major figure in the country's independence movement that garnered him a Nobel Peace Prize in 1996, but who was later accused of having abused multiple teenage boys.

At a Sept. 9 address to government leaders in the East Timor capital of Dili, Francis obliquely referenced the case, lamenting that abuse cases throughout society are rising and calling on everyone to fight "every kind of abuse."



East Timorese Bishop Carlos Ximenes Belo sprinkles holy water during an outdoor Mass in Dili in this file photo. The bishop, now retired, has been accused of sexual abuse of minors. (CNS/Reuters)

On the return flight to Rome, Francis was asked about Belo, as well as the recent allegations against one of France's most renowned priests, the late charity founder Abbé Pierre, who like Belo was known as a charismatic personality with a large public following, who has been accused of abuse and harassment by at least two dozen women.

"We must not say 'cover up, cover up so that this is not seen,' " the pope said of these cases, adding that he is pleased when such cases come to light as it forces the church to confront them.

Abuse, said Francis, is both "demonic" and a "crime."

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Future travel plans: Paris, Argentina and the Canary Islands?

When it comes to future travel, the pope directly denied a recent report that he would travel to Paris on Dec. 8 for the reopening of Notre Dame Cathedral after a devastating fire that forced the cathedral to close in 2019.
"I will not go," said the pope.

Rumors that the pope intended to preside at the Mass for its reopening spread rapidly following an article written by French columnist Caroline Pigozzi saying that during the pope's Sept. 2nd flight to Indonesia, she asked the pope if he would travel to the French capital for the occasion.

In the article, Pigozzi explained that the pope responded by giving her a "thumbs up," which she interpreted as confirmation of his intention to travel to France. But in speaking to journalists on Sept. 13, the pope was resolute in his rejection of Pigozzi's original report.



A general view shows Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris Aug. 25, 2024, the day of commemoration ceremonies marking the 80th anniversary of the liberation of Paris from Nazi rule. (OSV News/Reuters/Christian Hartman)

As for other travel, the pope said that while he would like to eventually make his first ever homecoming trip to his native Argentina, he remains undecided.

"There are a number of things to resolve first," he said.

He did, however, note that he would like to visit the Canary Islands, a Spanish archipelago off the coast of Africa that has experienced a massive wave of migrants from West Africa. The pope said a potential visit there would be a means of showing closeness to both the government and the people.

Despite a range of underlying health challenges and much skepticism by Vatican officials that Francis could endure such a demanding journey, the almost 88-year-old pontiff managed this intense, nearly two-week journey with relative ease, delighting history-making crowds along the way and seemingly reinvigorating himself in the process.

On Sept. 26, he will depart again for another trip, this time to Luxembourg and Belgium. The journey will mark the pope's 46th international journey of his papacy.

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