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Vatican treads carefully on Egyptian violence

by Francis X. Rocca by Religion News Service

VATICAN CITY -- Treading carefully on a subject that has proved diplomatically volatile for the Vatican, Pope Benedict XVI lamented Sunday's (Oct. 9) killing of two dozen Christian protesters in Egypt.

"I am profoundly saddened by the episodes of violence that took place in Cairo last Sunday," Benedict said on Wednesday (Oct. 12), referring to clashes between Coptic Christians and government security forces that led to the deaths of at least 25 protesters.

The pope voiced his pain at "attempts to undermine peaceful coexistence" between Egypt's Christian minority and Muslim majority, and called for "true peace, based on justice and respect for the freedom and dignity of all citizens."

"I support the efforts made by the civil and religious authorities in Egypt to foster a society in which everyone's human rights are respected, in particular those of minorities," Benedict said, without mentioning the religious affiliation of the protesters.

Earlier this year, after Benedict denounced the "vile and murderous" New Year's Day killing of at least 21 people by a car bomb outside a Coptic church in Alexandria, the grand imam of Cairo's prestigious Al-Azhar University denounced the statement as "unacceptable interference in Egypt's affairs."

A week later, Benedict mentioned the attack again, along with other killings of Christians in the Middle East, and called for "effective measures for the protection of religious minorities."

The next day, the Egyptian government recalled its ambassador to the Vatican to protest what a spokesman called the pope's "unacceptable interference in (Egypt's) internal affairs."

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