

Pope says forgiveness key to reconciling divided Korea

Francis X. Rocca Catholic News Service | Aug. 15, 2014

Francis in Korea

Seoul, South Korea

Addressing young people from Korea and other Asian countries on their concerns about the future, Pope Francis said the best hope for reunification of the divided Korean peninsula lay in brotherly love and a spirit of forgiveness.

"You are brothers who speak the same language," the pope said Friday. "When you speak the same language in a family, there is also a human hope."

The pope's remarks came in response to a question from a young Korean woman, Marina Park, attending an Asian Youth Day gathering in Solmoe, about 60 miles south of Seoul. Park asked the pope how young South Korean Catholics should view communist North Korea after six decades of "reciprocal hatred" between the two countries.

"Are there two Koreas?" Pope Francis asked in response. "No, there is one, but it is divided, the family is divided."

To promote reunification, the pope said he had one piece of advice to offer and one reason for hope.

"My advice is to pray, pray for our brothers in the North," he said, "that there might not be victors and defeated, only one family."

He then led the audience of some 6,000 people in silent prayer for Korean reunification.

To illustrate his reason for hope, Pope Francis cited the Old Testament story of Joseph, who forgave and fed his brothers even though they had sold him into slavery.

"When Joseph's brothers went into Egypt to buy food because they were hungry, they found a brother," he said. "Joseph noticed that they spoke the same language."

The pope also cited the Gospel parable of the prodigal son, a familiar reference in his preaching. A group of young performers had enacted the parable onstage a few minutes earlier.

The prodigal son's father embraced his repentant son immediately. "He didn't let him speak, he didn't even let him ask for pardon," the pope said. "He celebrated."

"We can do very ugly things, but please don't despair," he said. "There is always the Father who waits for us."

Pope Francis' answer was not part of the original program for the afternoon event, which called for him to read a prepared text in English, only the third time as pope that he has used the language before a live audience.

But with his usual tendency to improvise, the pope departed from his text and shifted into Italian to reply to the young people.

He also answered the question of a young Cambodian woman, Leap Lakaraksmeay, who said she was trying to choose between entering religious life and continuing her university studies in order to help the poor in her native village.

"When the Lord calls, he always calls us to do good for others," the pope said. "But you shouldn't choose. The Lord chooses. You have to ask: 'Lord, what should I do?' "

The pope also assured the young woman, who lamented the lack of canonized saints from her country, that he would ask the Congregation for Saints' Causes to look into the possibility of recognizing the martyrdom of Catholics killed in Cambodia in the 1970s by the communist regime under Pol Pot.

Pope Francis notably did not answer the other person who had been allowed to question him publicly at the event: a young man from Hong Kong, Giovanni Pang, who asked how to help Catholics in China, where he said "control and oppression" were increasing as the church on the mainland grew.

China requires Catholics to register with a government-controlled Catholic Patriotic Association, which has ordained bishops without approval of the pope, and Chinese authorities have frequently arrested members of the so-called underground or clandestine Catholic communities there. According to unconfirmed reports in Korean media, some Chinese Catholics planning to attend events with Pope Francis had been prevented from traveling to South Korea.

After the event, Pang told reporters that the pope had assured him he would be praying for China.

Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi, Vatican spokesman, told reporters Pope Francis had chosen to avoid "political" topics such as China at an event whose character was supposed to be "pastoral."

The pope appeared at the Solmoe event following a lunch with Asian Youth Day participants from various countries and a visit to the reconstructed birthplace of St. Andrew Kim, the first native-born Korean priest, who was martyred in 1846 at the age of 25.

On his way into the tent set up for his meeting with young people, the pope was greeted with cheers and outstretched hands, many holding tablets and cellphone cameras. Before stepping up to the stage, he stopped and allowed one member of the audience to attach a yellow-ribbon pin to his cassock.

The pin has been adopted by family members of those killed in the April sinking of the Sewol ferry, some of whom the pope met earlier in the day, who are pressing the South Korean government to appoint an independent investigation of the disaster.

[Simone Orendain contributed to this story.]

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