

Pope's Turkey trip touched all faith, diplomatic bases: Conciliatory mood a fitting ending to landmark visit

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Defying worried predictions, Pope Benedict XVI ended a momentous four-day trip to Turkey on a high note early this month, celebrating mass for the country's small Roman Catholic community and basking in widespread media praise of his landmark visit to a mosque.

The conciliatory mood provided a fitting end to a papal trip that many initially feared would stoke tensions between the Muslim world and the West.

For months, Turks and Muslims around the world have criticized the pope for comments he made about Islam during a speech in Germany in September. Indeed, on November 26 thousands of Turks marched through Istanbul to protest the pontiff's visit before he arrived. However, by the time Benedict boarded his return flight to Rome on December 1 the anger for the most part had become amity.

"We are brothers in religion," read a front-page headline in Turkey's *Vatan* newspaper, an Islamic daily.

Across Turkey, other newspapers splashed photos of the pontiff clasping his hands in prayer within the iconic tiled walls of Istanbul's Blue Mosque. *Zaman*, another Islamic daily, approvingly noted that the pontiff had avoided praying during an earlier stop at the Hagia Sophia, a former Christian church that is now a state museum.

Benedict began the day by celebrating mass before packed pews in Istanbul's Church of the Holy Spirit. The mass was attended by top Eastern Orthodox leaders, including Armenian patriarch Mesrob II and Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomeos I, who had held talks with Benedict earlier in the week.

“Your communities walk the humble path of daily companionship with those who do not share our faith,” Benedict said in a sermon.

While Benedict displayed a powerful command of the diplomatic stagecraft commonly associated with his predecessor, John Paul II, his visit to Turkey left many questions about Vatican-Islam relations unanswered. Although the Vatican says the trip aimed to establish “mutual respect” between the religions and set the stage for “sincere and frank” dialogue with the Muslim world, those objectives were largely overshadowed by Benedict’s peacemaking overtures.

Ali Ince, who operates a shoeshine stand in Istanbul, called the visit beautiful. “Everyone thought there would be huge protests to his visit, but there was no opposition. Benedict showed that he was open to dialogue,” he said.

The pope also faces questions regarding his evolving position on Turkey’s ambition to join the European Union. Benedict scored high marks with the public after Turkey’s prime minister Recep Erdogan quoted him as backing the EU candidacy. The Vatican, however, has stated that it has “neither the power” to “nor the specific political task” of seeking Turkey’s admission into the bloc. (The Turkish bid to join the EU was set back in November when the European Commission recommended that negotiations be partially suspended because of Turkey’s continuing refusal to open its ports to ships from Cyprus, a nation hampered by divisions in its Greek-Turkish population.)

The news spotlight on the cordiality shown during the papal visit pleased citizens such as Erdan Turkugu, a taxi driver, who was relieved to see the overwhelming security measures end with Benedict’s departure. “It was a wonderful meeting of cultures and, other than the bad traffic, a big success for Turkey,” he concluded. – *Scott Rank, Stacy Meichtry, Religion News Service*