

Pope Francis: God redeemed everyone, 'not just Catholics'

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(RNS) Pope Francis is warning Catholics not to demonize those who are not members of the church, and he specifically defended atheists, saying that building walls against non-Catholics leads to “killing in the name of God.”

“(T)his ‘closing off’ that imagines that those outside, everyone, cannot do good is a wall that leads to war and also to what some people throughout history have conceived of: killing in the name of God,” Francis said Wednesday (May 22) in remarks at the informal morning Mass that he celebrates in the chapel at the Vatican guesthouse where he lives.

“And that, simply, is blasphemy. To say that you can kill in the name of God is blasphemy.”

Francis explained that doing good is not a matter of faith: “It is a duty, it is an identity card that our Father has given to all of us, because he has made us in his image and likeness.”

To both atheists and believers, he said that “if we do good to others, if we meet there, doing good, and we go slowly, gently, little by little, we will make that culture of encounter: we need that so much. We must meet one another doing good.”

In a passage that may prompt a theological debate about the nature of salvation, the pontiff also declared that God “has redeemed all of us, all of us, with the Blood of Christ: all of us, not just Catholics. Everyone!”

“Even the atheists,” he said to those who might question his assertion. “Everyone!”

Wednesday's remarks displayed the kind of plain-spokenness that has become a hallmark of Francis' homilies and speeches, and they also developed themes that Francis frequently mentions in a pontificate that is just over two months old.

One is that the Catholic Church must be open to the world and not "self-referential, closed in on herself," as he said last weekend at Pentecost. Another is that the church must be humble and recognize its own shortcomings, and that it should be tolerant of nonbelievers.

Francis' homily on Wednesday was inspired by the passage in the Gospel of Mark in which the disciples tell Jesus that they tried to stop someone from driving out demons because he was not one of their party.

Jesus rebukes them saying: "There is no one who performs a mighty deed in my name who can at the same time speak ill of me. For whoever is not against us is for us."

The pope's remarks were reported by Vatican Radio.