

Pope Francis fails to find common ground in Turkey

by [Nick Squires](#)

December 1, 2014

([The Christian Science Monitor](#)) The idea was to reach out to Muslims, but Pope Francis got a prickly reception from his hosts during his first trip to Turkey.

In a series of strongly-worded addresses in Ankara and Istanbul, the 77-year-old Pope blamed the “fanaticism” of the Islamic State and other militant groups for persecuting Christians in Syria and Iraq and forcing an exodus of communities that have lived in the Middle East for 2,000 years.

But President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who received the leader of the world’s 1.2 billion Catholics at his controversial \$600 million palace outside Ankara on Friday, took a very different tack.

He said extremist groups like IS, responsible for beheading prisoners, enslaving captives, and promising to wipe out religious minorities such as the Yazidis in Iraq and Syria, are a consequence of “the rise of Islamophobia” in the West.

“Those who feel defeated, wronged, oppressed and abandoned,” the Turkish leader said, “can become open to being exploited by terror organizations.”

Blame the 'foreigners'

On Thursday Erdogan said “foreigners” do not like Muslims and are only interested in exploiting the Middle East’s natural resources.

“Foreigners love oil, gold, diamonds and the cheap labor force of the Islamic world,” he said. “They like the conflicts, fights and quarrels of the Middle East. Believe me, they don’t like us. They look like friends, but they want us dead, they like seeing our children die.”

The president repeated his complaint about growing anti-Muslim sentiment in the West when the Pope turned up at his sprawling palace on Friday.

Erdogan told Francis that there was a “very serious and rapid trend of growth in racism, discrimination, and hatred of others, especially Islamophobia in the West.”

Expressing concern for the plight of Christians was a key plank of the Pope’s three-day visit, but it clashed with the fact that Turkey has been accused of fomenting the persecution of Christians and other minorities by failing to stop Islamist militants from crossing its borders to fight in Syria and Iraq.

Turkey’s reluctance to join the U.S.-led campaign of air strikes against IS also jarred with the position of the pope, who during his visit said it was legitimate to stop “an unjust aggressor,” while insisting that military force was not a solution by itself.

The pope expressed his dismay at the persecution of Christians in a joint declaration with Patriarch Bartholomew I, the spiritual head of the world’s 300 million Orthodox Christians, who is based in Istanbul.

“We cannot resign ourselves to a Middle East without Christians, who have professed the name of Jesus there for 2,000 years,” the two leaders said. “Many of our brothers and sisters are being persecuted and have been forced violently from their homes.”

Blue Mosque

Francis’s desire to build better relations with the Muslim world was illustrated when he visited Istanbul’s Blue Mosque on Saturday, engaging in a few minutes of silent contemplation alongside the chief mufti, Rahmi Yaran.

It was not strictly a prayer, the Vatican said, because it took place in a non-Christian place of worship, but rather “a moment of silent adoration.”

Aside from differences of opinion with Erdogan, the Pope received an underwhelming reception in Turkey—little surprise, perhaps, given that around 99 percent of the population is Muslim and only around 80,000 Christians remain in the country.

There were none of the cheering crowds that have greeted him on his previous international trips, which have included visits to the Holy Land, South Korea, and Brazil, where millions of people crowded onto Copacabana beach in Rio de Janeiro to hear the pontiff speak.

“He seems like a good man, but I don’t really care about his visit,” said Ahmet, the owner of a carpet store in the historic heart of Istanbul.

A tiny group of Christians turned up when he visited Hagia Sophia, a Christian basilica dating back to the fifth century, when Istanbul was Constantinople.

It was converted into a mosque after the Ottoman conquest of the city in the 15th century, but then turned into a museum in the 1930s under the secular rule of Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, the founder of modern Turkey.

“We’re very happy to see him here,” said Can Barlas, a 50-year-old Turkish Christian who belongs to the Armenian Catholic Church.

As he spoke, army snipers could be seen on the slender minarets that surround Hagia Sophia, and a drone operated by Turkish police hovered overhead.

On Sunday, the third and final day of his trip, the Argentinean pontiff met a group of Christian and Muslim refugees forced to flee Syria and Iraq and now living in Istanbul.

The group of 100 refugees, three-quarters of them children, are among the estimated 30,000 Christians who have sought sanctuary in Turkey since the start of the Syrian war.

“The degrading conditions in which so many refugees are forced to live are intolerable,” the pope told the refugees, who receive assistance from the Salesians, a Roman Catholic order.

The Vatican confirmed that the Pope had wanted to visit a refugee camp on the border with Syria but said that there had not been enough time to include it in his schedule.

“The Pope desires many things but there was no time to do it,” said Federico Lombardi, the Vatican spokesman. “If we had had four or five days instead of three, then maybe it would have been possible.”