

Pope Francis says Egypt trip promoted ‘healthy secularism’

John L. Allen Jr., *Crux*, 3 May 2017



Pope Francis, flanked by Sheikh Ahmed el-Tayeb, right, Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, the pre-eminent institute of Islamic learning in the Sunni Muslim world, greets participants in an International peace conference, in Cairo, Egypt, Friday, April 28, 2017. Pope Francis is on a two-day pilgrimage to Egypt including a meeting with Egypt's president and the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar as well as a Mass in a stadium on the outskirts of Cairo. (Credit: AP Photo/Amr Nabil.)

Pope Francis said on Wednesday that his April 28-29 trip to Egypt was intended as a "sign of peace" and a way of promoting a vision of "healthy secularism" for the entire Middle East region, in which religion and state are separate but religion is encouraged and allowed to flourish. He called on Christians in the Middle East to be "salt and light," and prayed for new Christian martyrs.

ROME – Calling his April 28-29 visit to Egypt a “sign of peace,” Pope Francis said Wednesday that he went to the country to defend a “vision of healthy secularism” in a region often gripped by religious extremism and violence.

“The grand historical and religious patrimony of Egypt, and its role in the Middle East region, confers on it a special obligation to contribute to a stable and durable peace, based not on the law of force but on the force of law,” Francis said.

The vision of “healthy secularism,” the pope said, emerged in his conversation with President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, President of Egypt, and in a session with the country’s political and diplomatic leaders.

“Healthy secularism” is a phrase originally coined by former French President Nicolas Sarkozy, and taken over by emeritus Pope Benedict XVI to refer to a form of church/state separation that provides freedom for religion, but doesn’t suppress the role of religion in public life.

The pontiff’s comments came in his regular Wednesday General Audience, his first after completing the outing to Egypt, which was the 18th of his papacy and his third to the Middle East.

Francis noted that he traveled to Egypt in response to a four-fold invitation:

- Sisi, the country’s president.

- Pope Tawadros II, leader of the Coptic Orthodox Church, by far the country's largest Christian denomination and also the largest in the Middle East.
- Ahmad al-Tayeb, Grand Imam of the Al-Azhar mosque and university, the most prestigious center of learning in the Sunni Muslim world.
- Patriarch Ibrahim Isaac Sidrak of the Coptic Catholic Church.

Francis said he made the trip as a “sign of peace, for Egypt and for the entire region, which unfortunately suffers from conflicts and terrorism.”

While in Egypt, Francis delivered several strong calls for religious and political leaders in the Middle East to “unmask the violence that masquerades as purported sanctity.

“Let us say once more a firm and clear ‘No!’ to every form of violence, vengeance and hatred carried out in the name of religion or the name of God,” he said during his April 28 address at Al-Azhar. “Together let us affirm the incompatibility of violence and faith, belief and hatred.”

Francis returned to those themes on Wednesday.

“Peace is constructed through education, the formation of wisdom, and a humanism that sees the religious dimension as an integral part of the relationship with God,” he said.

On Wednesday, Francis also noted that the trip had a strongly ecumenical character.

“We were able to give a strong sign of communion, thanks to God, with my dear brother Pope Tawadros II, Patriarch of the Coptic Orthodox,” Francis said.

“We renewed our commitment, signing a joint declaration, to journey together and to commit ourselves to not repeat the baptisms administered in our respective churches,” he said.

The pope's two days in Egypt took place under the shadow of the Palm Sunday bombings of two Coptic churches, one in the Delta region of the country and another in Alexandria, that left 45 people dead. Francis said he and Pope Tawadros had prayed for these martyrs together.

“Their blood made our ecumenical encounter fruitful,” Francis said.

Speaking to the Christian minority in Egypt and the Middle East, Francis called on them to exhibit “the joy of the faith, the ardor of hope, and the strength of giving witness in love to the fact that ‘we have met the Lord!’”

The pontiff said he had prayed for all the Christians of the Middle East, that they may be “light and salt in these lands, in the middle of these people.”

Speaking ad-lib, Francis said he was pleased to see so many seminarians in Egypt, calling it a “consolation.”

The pontiff's next foreign trip will come May 12-13, when he visits the fabled Marian shrine of Fatima in Portugal.