



Pope Francis speaks at the Coptic Catholic College of Theology and Humanities in the southern Cairo suburb of Maadi

'Dialogue can battle extremism'

Cairo

Pope Francis

appealed for dialogue to battle extremism as he addressed thousands of faithful yesterday during a visit to Egypt to promote reconciliation with Muslims and support its embattled Christians.

His visit, coming after the Islamic State group (IS) killed dozens of worshippers in three Egyptian church bombings earlier this month and in December, gave the country's beleaguered Christian community an occasion to be joyful.

"The only fanaticism believers can have is that of

charity," the pope said at a mass for Egypt's Catholics.

"True faith... moves our heart to love everyone... It makes us see the other not as an enemy to be overcome but a brother and sister to be loved," he told a crowd of about 15,000 pilgrims.

"It spurs us on to spread, defend and live out the culture of encounter, dialogue, respect and fraternity."

The mass came on the second and last day of Francis's visit, which saw him plead for tolerance and peace on Friday as he visited a Coptic church bombed by IS in December.

The spiritual leader of the world's almost 1.3 billion Catholics also became the first pope to visit the headquarters of the grand imam of Al-Azhar, Ahmed al-Tayeb, one of the Muslim

world's leading religious authorities.

'Historic occasion'

Also on Friday, Francis met Coptic Orthodox patriarch Pope Tawadros II, and both attended an emotional service at the church attacked in the December suicide bombing.

They prayed at a makeshift shrine for its victims, who were mostly women.

They also signed a joint declaration pledging to "strive for serenity and concord through a peaceful co-existence of Christians and Muslims".

On Saturday, the crowd cheered and released yellow and white balloons as Francis lapped the Cairo stadium in a golf cart, waving to the crowd as a chorus sang a joyous hymn.

Worshippers old and young, nuns and priests, had been bused in under tight security with Egypt under a state of emergency following the church bombings.

It was, said Coptic Catholic engineer Maged Francis, a "historic occasion".

"It's unlikely it will ever happen again," he said. "Today joy has eclipsed the sadness of the last few weeks." The stadium chosen for Saturday's mass is on Cairo's outskirts and easier to secure, but in 2015 it saw clashes between football fans and a stampede that killed 19 people.

After the mass, the pope travelled to a seminary in Cairo where he urged his audience to promote dialogue. Heavy security surrounded his tightly scheduled trip as he travelled from one engagement to another in a closed car.



Pope Francis during a meeting with religious

'Peace is holy'

IS has threatened further attacks after the suicide bombings that killed 29 people in Cairo in December and 45 people in the cities of Tanta and Alexandria north of the capital earlier this month.

On Friday, the 80-year-old pontiff denounced violence and "demagogic" populism in an address to a Muslim-Christian conference.

"Peace alone... is holy

and no act of violence can be perpetrated in the name of God, for it would profane his name," Francis said.

He criticised what he called "demagogic forms of populism... on the rise", saying they were unhelpful to peace.

In another speech attended by Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, the pope also called

for "unconditional respect" for human rights.

Egypt has the largest Christian community in the Middle East.

While most of Egypt's Christians are Coptic Orthodox, about 272,000 are Catholic.

Francis's visit comes 17 years after Pope John Paul II made a trip to the Arab world's most populous nation.

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