
POPE FRANCIS URGES BULGARIA TO OPEN ITS HEART TO REFUGEES

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Making his first visit to Bulgaria, Pope Francis on Sunday pointedly appealed for care for migrants in one of the corners of Europe that has been most unwelcoming to them □ a stance that puts him at odds with both the country's government and its dominant church.

Since the migrant crisis of 2015, one of the pope's most emphatic and consistent messages has been the need to welcome refugees, who he believes have been exploited by fear-mongering European nationalists.

But rarely has he delivered it in a nation that has so few Roman Catholics □ they make up less than 1 percent of the seven million people in a country that is mostly Bulgarian Orthodox □ or such powerful opposition to his view (though the Vatican itself is surrounded by widespread hostility toward immigrants that enabled the right to take power in Italy).

After a brief meeting Sunday morning with President Rumen Radev in the capital, Sofia, Francis noted that Bulgaria was familiar with the drama of emigration. The country is losing its youth and educated classes to opportunities abroad and has, according to the United Nations, the fastest-shrinking population in the world.

I respectfully suggest, Francis said, that you not close your eyes, your hearts or your hands, in accordance with your best tradition, to those who knock at your door.

Bulgaria, the poorest country in the European Union, has seen only a fraction of the hundreds of thousands of migrants seeking to get to Western Europe through the Balkans. The figure peaked at about 20,000 asylum seekers in 2015, according to the government.

The numbers may be small, but the issue resonates in Bulgaria, which has built a fence along its border with Turkey.

Last year, the government declined to join a United Nations global pact on migration, a nonbinding agreement strongly supported by the pope that was aimed at regulating the treatment of migrants worldwide. And in 2016, groups of vigilante refugee hunters started to patrol the border to prevent an influx of asylum seekers.

On Sunday, the pope spoke of reconciliation between Rome and the Orthodox church, whose schism dates back nearly 1,000 years, but there was no mistaking the gap between them.

In 2015, at the height of the refugee crisis, the Bulgarian Orthodox Church issued a statement,

signed by its leader, Patriarch Neophyte, describing the migration as an invasion and urging the government not to allow more refugees into the country. The church had compassion for the migrants, it said, but they raised the prospect of our disappearing as a state.

On Sunday, at a square in the heart of Sofia where the pope celebrated Mass, Miloslava Nikolova endorsed his message of compassion, but she was more cautious about Bulgaria's obligations.

After all, Bulgaria is a small country and we need some security, she said, holding her 5-month-old baby. I understand that we need to support those fleeing war and conflict, but some of the people coming to Europe are economic migrants.

Emanuel Nikolov, a 34-year-old Christian Orthodox Bulgarian who came to the Mass out of curiosity, strongly opposed Francis' call to support refugees. Along with the migrants, there are terrorists and Islamists entering our country, he said. They are threatening the national security.

Politicians and the pope alike know exactly why these people are coming to Europe, but their speeches are just empty words, Mr. Nikolov said.

The pope is expected on Monday to visit a refugee camp on the outskirts of Sofia that houses about 65 asylum seekers, most of them from Iraq and Syria — a far cry from its swelling numbers during the peak of the migrant crisis. Then he will head to North Macedonia, the birthplace of Mother Teresa, and another predominantly Orthodox nation with few Catholics.

Francis is only the second pope to visit Bulgaria; Pope John Paul II made a trip in 2002.

His visit to the Balkan nations represents a pivot for him from the Muslim world, which has occupied most of his travel schedule so far this year, including trips to the United Arab Emirates and Morocco.

Francis received a somewhat chilly reception from the Bulgarian Orthodox hierarchy, which ordered its priests to refrain from worshipping with the pope and made clear that the invitation to him had come from the Bulgarian government, not from the church.

The Bulgarian church's Holy Synod issued a statement before the visit to emphasize that any form of shared liturgical or prayer service, as well as wearing of liturgical garments, is unacceptable to us as the holy canons do not allow this.

Francis prayed alone at St. Alexander Nevsky Cathedral in Sofia on Sunday. He sat on a red velvet armchair bordered in gold, often with his hands covering his face, in front of an image of Sts. Cyril and Methodius.

He met with the Patriarch Neophyte near the cathedral and spoke privately with him for about half an hour.

A crowd greeted Francis, chanting his name and long live the pope as he walked to the cathedral.

After the meeting, he gave a speech to a crowd of a few thousand people on brotherhood between the churches, noting that Bulgaria, while an Orthodox country, is a crossroads where various religious expressions encounter one another and engage in dialogue.

He added, I have had the joy of greeting and embracing my brother, His Holiness Patriarch Neophyte.

At the refugee camp in Sofia, Zahra, a 17-year-old from Afghanistan, recalled last week the crowded conditions in another camp when her family first arrived in Bulgaria. The camp was so packed with people that we had to share a very small room with another family, she said, speaking fluent Bulgarian.

The vast majority of the migrants have continued on to Western European countries that have not taken as hard a line against migrants, and offer more economic opportunities.

Last week, Lauin Sadek, a 23-year-old Iraqi Kurd, returned from work after taking a route through an underpass marred with swastikas and a blue scrawl reading Refugees Out, and past the spot where three Eritrean refugees were beaten last year.

He said he feared deportation and hoped to tell Francis about the challenges that asylum seekers like him face. I would like to give him a note with my personal story, he said.

Two years ago, an Italian Catholic priest in Bulgaria, Paolo Cortesi, felt the heat of anti-migrant sentiment firsthand, after his parish in Belene, a town on the Danube, took in a Syrian family that had been granted refugee status and wanted to stay.

Amid local opposition, the refugees were forced to leave, and the priest, who received death threats, was called back to Italy for six months as a precaution. He returned to Bulgaria in 2017.

Im ready to help another family and I hope I wont be the only one, he said in an interview. Migration shouldnt be treated as a threat. People have been migrating from continent to continent since the dawn of mankind.

The Orthodox and Roman churches formally split in 1054 over theological and political disputes. Despite significant improvements in relations after the Second Vatican Council of the 1960s, which recognized the validity of Eastern sacraments, a full reconciliation has not occurred.

Pope John XXIII, who announced the Second Vatican Council in 1959, had deep experience in Bulgaria, serving as the apostolic delegate there for a decade when he was known as Archbishop Angelo Giuseppe Roncalli. In Bulgaria, he is often called the Bulgarian pope.

Francis paid tribute on Sunday to John XXIII, saying that the pontiff, who was canonized in 2014, had worked tirelessly to promote fraternal cooperation between all Christians and to support the development of ecumenical relationships.

Francis recalled that John XXIII once said that wherever he would go, his house would always be open to everyone, Catholic or Orthodox alike, who came as a brother or sister from Bulgaria.

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