

Pope, on flight, talks about dialogue, war, abuse of women religious

ABOARD THE PAPAL FLIGHT FROM ABU DHABI, United Arab Emirates — Pope Francis told reporters he is more afraid of the consequences of not engaging in interreligious dialogue than he is of being manipulated by some Muslim leaders.

He told reporters flying back to Rome with him Feb. 5 from Abu Dhabi that people are always saying he's letting himself be used by someone, "including journalists, but it's part of the job."

"For me, there is only one great danger at this moment: destruction, war, hatred among us," the pope said, explaining why he and Egyptian Sheik Ahmad el-Tayeb, grand imam of al-Azhar, spent a year writing back and forth to finalize the document they signed Feb. 4 in Abu Dhabi on promoting "human fraternity" and Christian-Muslim understanding.

"If we believers aren't able to extend a hand, embrace and also pray, our faith will be defeated," the pope said. The Abu Dhabi "document is born of faith in God, who is father of all and father of peace."

Pope Francis spent about 35 minutes answering reporters' questions, although he insisted on responding first to questions related to the trip. That meant he put on hold until the end of the session a question about the clerical sexual abuse of women religious.

The women's supplement to the Vatican newspaper printed a story in its February issue on the abuse of women religious. Asked about it, Pope Francis said, "It's true, it's a problem," especially in some newer Catholic communities and congregations.

"There have been priests and even bishops who have done that," the pope said. "And I would guess that it still happens today, because it is not something that ends just because people know about it."

"We have been working on this for a while," Pope Francis said. "We have suspended some priests, sent them away for this, and — I'm not sure if the whole process had been completed — but we also have dissolved a few women's religious congregations," newer ones, where corruption and sexual abuse were found.

"Must more be done? Yes," he said.

The Catholic Church owes much to the "courage" of then-Pope Benedict XVI for beginning to tackle the problem, Pope Francis told reporters. As prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger tried to investigate a congregation where women were allegedly being abused, he said, but the investigation was blocked.

Pope Francis did not provide more details, but said that as soon as Cardinal Ratzinger became Pope Benedict, he called for the files he had compiled and began again.

The now-retired pope, he said, dissolved a congregation "because the slavery of women, including sexual slavery, had become part of it."

Alessandro Gisotti, interim director of the Vatican press office, said the dissolved congregation was the Sisters of Israel and St. John; he would not provide information about who initially blocked then-Cardinal Ratzinger's investigation.

Pope Francis also was asked about the war in Yemen and about the conditions that would be necessary before the Holy See would offer to mediate in the ongoing political crisis in Venezuela.

On the question of intervening in Venezuela, Pope Francis said he had been informed of the arrival by diplomatic pouch of a letter from Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro, who is trying to hold on to power in the country.

Asked if he was ready to mediate, Pope Francis said the Vatican would offer assistance only if both sides requested its help and if both sides showed a willingness to take steps toward resolving the crisis.

As for Yemen, where millions of people risk starvation because of four years of war, the pope said he raised the situation there with government officials from the United Arab Emirates, an active member of the Saudi Arabia-led coalition fighting the Houthi armed movement.

Declining to share details about his private conversations with UAE leaders about the war, the pope would say only that he found “goodwill for starting a peace process.”

A reporter asked the pope how he feels having the name Francis, traveling to promote peace and then being welcomed with a flyover of military jets and a 21-cannon salute, as happened in Abu Dhabi.

“I interpret all gestures of welcome as gestures of goodwill,” he said. Every country designs the welcome ceremony according to its own traditions and culture. The UAE, he said, “wanted to do everything” to show him and the world how important they thought his visit was, and “they wanted to make me feel welcome.”

While Pope Francis said his less than 48 hours in Abu Dhabi wasn’t enough, he said

he appreciated the openness of the country's Muslim leaders and their willingness to host the Human Fraternity meeting and the signing of the dialogue document.

Some Catholics may not appreciate the document and the respect it shows for Islam, but it is based on the teachings of the Second Vatican Council, he said, and he had several theologians, including the "theologian of the papal household, a Dominican," read it to ensure it conformed to Catholic teaching.

"The document was written in the spirit of Vatican II," he said.

Asked why he did not speak more forcefully in public about the persecution of Christians and more strongly about how religious freedom involves more than freedom of worship, Pope Francis said he speaks about those things often, but the focus in Abu Dhabi was "more about unity and friendship."

"Freedom is a process," he said, one "which we must respect and accompany" as it expands in nations where there is goodwill and openness.

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