

## Pope Francis travels to Turkey

Pope Francis to try to tackle relations with Islam, Christian persecution in the Muslim world and the Catholic-Orthodox schism



Pope Francis embarks on one of the most delicate missions of his 18-month-old papacy on Friday, when he is expected to wrestle with the problems of Christian persecution in the Muslim world and tackle relations with Islam in a time of spreading jihadism during his visit to Turkey.

As if that were not enough, he is also expected to deal with the millenium-old schism between Catholicism and Orthodoxy that centred on the city that is now Istanbul.

The fourth pope to visit Turkey, Francis will seek to emphasise his commitment to dialogue with Muslims and other Christians at a time of increased violence against Christian minorities in the region.

He is to make what his spokesman, Father Federico Lombardi, described as a very important speech on Muslim-Christian relations on Friday.

While in Ankara, the 77-year-old Argentinian pontiff is also due to visit Turkey's directorate for religious affairs, or Diyanet, and meet Mehmet Görmez, the country's most senior cleric. Görmez said he wanted to raise the problem of Islamophobia in his talks with the pope.

"Horrible things are happening everywhere in the Islamic world," he told Deutsche Welle radio.

"These incidents have negatively affected Muslims not only [in the region], but also in Europe. While all these painful events are unfolding, there are those that argue that the source of these problems is Islam, which leads to injustices being committed against Islam

"We will have to work closely together with the pope on this," he said.

Francis will also walk straight into another controversy when he visits the Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's new palace built on once-protected farm and forest in Ankara. He will be the first foreign dignitary to be hosted at the lavish, 1,000-room complex.

The palace, which dwarfs the White House and other European government palaces, cost of £394m. It has drawn the ire of opposition parties, environmentalists, human rights activists and architects who say it is too extravagant, has damaged the environment and was built despite a court injunction against it.

Erdoğan brazenly dismissed the court ruling. "Let them knock it down if they have the power," he said.

The Ankara branch of the Turkish Chamber of Architects sent a letter to the pope this month, urging him not to attend his welcoming ceremony on Friday at the "illegal" palace.

A spokesman for the pope brushed off the request. The Turkish government had invited Francis to visit

and he would go where the Turkish government wished to receive him, he said.

Among the questions hanging over the trip is whether Francis will pray alongside his Muslim hosts when he visits Istanbul's Sultan Ahmet mosque in Istanbul also known as the Blue Mosque on Saturday.

His predecessor, Pope Benedict, appalled many traditional Catholics when he appeared to do so on his visit to Turkey eight years ago. The Vatican put out a statement saying Benedict had merely been in meditation, though he conceded that he "certainly turned his thoughts to God".

Francis will be the fourth reigning pope to visit Turkey, and his comes at an intensely sensitive moment for the dwindling Christian communities of the Middle East. Many of the Iraqi and Syrian Christians who have fled their homes to escape the spread of Islamic State (Isis) are currently living as refugees in Turkey.

On Tuesday, Francis appeared to reach out for dialogue with Isis. "I never count anything as lost. Never. Never close the door. It's difficult, you could say almost impossible, but the door is always open," he said.

From the Vatican's standpoint, another important aspect of the visit will be the opportunity to consolidate the papacy's good relations with the ecumenical patriarch, Bartholomew I, the pre-eminent spiritual leader of the world's 300 million Orthodox Christians. Francis's stay in Turkey will coincide with the feast of St Andrew, whose significance for the Orthodox church is similar to that of St Peter for Catholics.

More than five centuries after Greek Christian Constantinople fell to Muslim Turks, the ecumenical patriarch and his aides still live in the city that is now Istanbul. Bartholomew attended Francis's investiture last year, the first ecumenical patriarch to attend such a ceremony in Rome since the two churches split almost 1,000 years ago.

The pope shares close personal ties with Bartholomew I, who is to receive him at the patriarchate, also known as the Phanar, on Saturday. The following day, which is the feast of St Andrew, the pope is due

to attend an Orthodox liturgy before the two men have lunch together.

“We are eagerly awaiting the visit of our brother, Pope Francis,” Bartholomew I said in a press release. “It will be yet another significant step in our positive relations as sister churches.”

Bartholomew I may generally be seen as conciliatory towards the Vatican, but the de facto leaders of the Orthodox church in Moscow are much warier and more hostile.

Interfaith dialogue has not always been easy in Turkey, a country with a 99% Muslim population, but many Christians say things have improved under the government of the Islamic Justice and Development party (AKP).

Erdo?an’s administration has shown partial support for the country’s Christian minorities. A law was passed last year to return property confiscated by the Turkish state to its owners and allow Christian religious classes in schools.

Dr Elpidophoros Lambriniadis, the metropolitan of Bursa and abbot of the Holy Trinity monastery on Halki, the second largest of the nine Princes’ Islands off the coast of Istanbul, is the former main secretary of the patriarchate. He said the last papal visit was overshadowed by the reluctance of his Turkish hosts.

“The Turks tried to put obstacles in our way wherever they could,” he said. “The AKP government still had to face the power of the secularists and the military then, and they were not pleased with the visit of the pope. This time there are no problems at all.”

His main grievance, and that of Orthodox Christians everywhere, is that the theological seminary housed in the monastery grounds since 1844 remains closed after the Turkish government banned all private higher education institutions in 1971. Erdo?an has previously said that no legal obstacles remain to the reopening of the school.

“Can there be a better place to educate true ecumenical staff open to interfaith dialogue than this school?” asked Lambriniadis, who is the first head of the school unable to graduate from it. “This is a theological school in a Muslim country from where high church officials graduate to be sent everywhere in the world. We can educate the kind of religious scholars that we so desperately need today.”

Constanze Letsch in Istanbul, John Hooper in Rome - The Guardia