

Pope Francis to visit the Greek island of Lesbos



(Vatican Radio) Pope Francis will travel to the Greek island of Lesbos on Saturday, April 16. In a statement Thursday, the Vatican Press Office confirmed next week's papal visit which aims to show support and solidarity for refugees on the front line of Europe's migrant crisis.

The communiqué says Pope Francis has accepted the invitations of the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, His Holiness Bartholomew I, and of the Greek President, Prokopis Pavlopoulos.

The Pope will meet with refugees on the island together with the Ecumenical Patriarch and with His Beatitude Hieronimus II, Archbishop of Athens and of Greece and primate of the Orthodox Church of Greece.

One million refugees have made their way to Greece over the past year - tens of thousands of them, many fleeing the war in Syria, have poured onto Lesbos.

This is a particularly delicate moment for refugees there because, under a contested plan, the European Union began returning newcomers to neighbouring Turkey this month.

Pope Francis "extremely attentive" to suffering

The director of the Vatican Press Office, Jesuit Father Federico Lombardi, told Vatican Radio that the Pope has always been "extremely attentive to all major emergencies in the world today, especially when there are people who suffer, who are in need of our solidarity and our help."

Fr. Lombardi recalled that in his very first journey as pontiff - just a few months after his election to the papacy in 2013 - Pope Francis visited the Italian island of Lampedusa, which also had received hundreds of thousands of migrants. In that visit, Fr. Lombardi said, the Pope wanted to demonstrate his "closeness" to those people coming across the Mediterranean from north Africa.

With the migrant crisis more recently unfolding in the Aegean, he said “the Pope naturally wanted to manifest – in a concrete manner - his participation and his concern.”

Ecumenical visit of Christian solidarity, invitation to action

Fr. Lombardi pointed out that Pope Francis will be visiting the island together with leaders of the Orthodox Church, the largest Christian community in Greece. Describing it as an “ecumenical gesture” by representatives of the Christian churches, Fr. Lombardi said the visit is an expression “of Christian solidarity and closeness to the great problem of refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants.”

Saying that though the Pope’s actions are not “directly political,” Fr. Lombardi affirmed they are “extremely significant” and are “humane, moral and religious” in nature. “This is of course an invitation to responsibility and commitment for everyone” to act “according to their place or position in society and in their relationships with others.” The Vatican spokesman said it is “also a call to politicians to take action in the search for more humane solutions” that are “respectful and supportive towards people who are suffering in these large problematic movements [of migrants] in the world today.”

(from Vatican Radio)

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