

## Pope Francis' visit to Turkey (28-30 November 2014)

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**Abstract:** *Between 28-30 november 2014, Pope Francis has visited the Republic of Turkey, being for the fourth time in the history of Vatican when a pope had arrived in this islamic country. The visit held by Holy Father in Turkey took place in the context of the Middle Est's tensions: the massacres of Christians and the proximity of Turkey with the terroitoires occupied by the terrorist group of the Islamic State. During the three days of visit, the Pope has pleaded for religious tolerance and for combating the extremism, especially because this meeting came in the tense context of the neighboring countries, Syria and Irak, where members of ISIS are killing and persecuting Christians and the others who don't share their religious beliefs.*

**Keywords:** Pope Francis, Turkey, ISIS, Catholic Church, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.

### Introduction

The year 2014 has brought with it an aggravation of the conflicts in the Middle East, where, from the ashes of the bloody Syrian civil war, a terrorist movement has been born - The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (from now on, ISIS) -, with the declared objectives of imposing the Islamic law worldwide and creating a radical Islamic state in the Middle East.

From 28 to 30 November 2014 Pope Francis took a visit to Turkey, this being the fourth time in Vatican history when a Supreme Pontiff reaches this Muslim country (after the visits of Paul VI, John Paul II, Benedict XVI). His Holiness' visit to Turkey took place on the grounds of an extreme tensioned atmosphere in the Middle East, the massacres to which the Christians are subjected and Turkey's proximity to the territories occupied by the Islamic State terrorist group<sup>1</sup>. According to his prescribed itinerary, Pope Francis made his first stop at Atatürk's mausoleum – Ataturk is the founder of the modern Turkish state – after

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<sup>1</sup> Andreea Orosz, „Papa Francis în vizită în Turcia”, *RFI Romania*, 29 November 2014, <http://www.rfi.ro/emisiunile-rfi-ro-54135-papa-francisc-vizita-turcia> (12.01.2015).

which he went to the White Palace – he has been the first important guest of the monumental Presidential Palace which was inaugurated with great pomposity at the end of August – for a meeting with Turkey’s President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the Prime-Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu and Mehmet Görmez, the President of Religious Affairs and the highest Muslim cleric in state’s hierarchy. On the second day, the Holy Father went to Istanbul to visit Hagia Sophia, Byzantine Empire’s former place of worship, and the Blue Mosque as well, and for a meeting with Bartholomew I, current leader of the Orthodox Church. Finally, on the last day of his visit, the Pope celebrated Mass at the Catholic Cathedral of the Holy Spirit alongside with the Ecumenical Patriarch of the Eastern Orthodox Church<sup>2</sup>.

### **Pope Francis and ISIS**

Pope Francis went to Turkey with a message that pleads for religious tolerance and counteracting extremism, especially because this visit came on an increasingly strained background in the neighboring countries, Syria and Iraq, where the ISIS militants persecute and kill Christians and all others who don’t share their religious beliefs. The Pope has declared that ‘there is a need to move forward patiently in the task of building a lasting peace, one founded on respect for the fundamental rights and duties rooted in the dignity of each person. In this way, we can overcome prejudices and unwarranted fears, leaving room for respect, encounter, and the release of more positive energies for the good of all’. At the same time, the Supreme Pontiff has drawn attention to the Middle East’s future, considered for too long as a theatre of fratricidal wars, wars to which the sole possible answer has always been a new war and more violence<sup>3</sup>.

Addressing himself to the President of Turkey, the Pope reasserted that in pursuing this urgent aim both inter-religious and intercultural dialogue is a key element that could bring real contributions and it could also put an end to all forms of fundamentalism and terrorism. These last two forms of manipulating religion are gravely affecting human dignity on the whole. The Pope also declared that

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<sup>2</sup> „The itinerary of the Pope Francis’ visit to Turkey”, 28 November 2014, <http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/travels/2014/outside/documents/papa-francesco-turchia-2014.html> (05.01.2015).

<sup>3</sup> “Meeting with the President, Prime Minister and Civil Authorities”, 28 November 2014, [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/speeches/2014/november/documents/papa-francesco\\_20141128\\_turchia-incontro-autorita.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/speeches/2014/november/documents/papa-francesco_20141128_turchia-incontro-autorita.html) (03.12.2014).

‘Fanaticism and fundamentalism, as well as irrational fears which foster misunderstanding and discrimination, need to be countered by the solidarity of all believers. This solidarity must rest on the following pillars: respect for human life and for religious freedom, that is the freedom to worship and to live according to the moral teachings of one’s religion; commitment to ensuring what each person requires for a dignified life; and care for the natural environment. The peoples and the states of the Middle East stand in urgent need of such solidarity, so that they can “reverse the trend” and successfully advance a peace process, repudiating war and violence and pursuing dialogue, the rule of law, and justice’<sup>4</sup>.

Likewise, he praises Turkey’s efforts to host refugees from Syria and Iraq<sup>5</sup>, arguing that the international community has the ‘moral obligation’ of providing them with humanitarian assistance<sup>6</sup>.

On the other side, President Erdogan expressed on this occasion his disappointment regarding the answer that Western powers gave to the Egyptian coup d’état and the massacres from Syria. Having ISIS at its borders, Turkey confronts itself with an increasing insecurity; the leader of this extremist group, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, has already announced his intention of conquering Rome and the world<sup>7</sup>. Erdogan has also declared that all massacres, religious conflicts, civil wars, violation of human rights and bloodshed in general are not receiving the proper reaction from other nations, being ‘sometimes almost encouraged’<sup>8</sup>.

Pope’s decision of going to Turkey is all the more praiseworthy considering that we are talking about a country where 99% of the population is Muslim and where Byzantine-Christian legacy is less and less visible. Turkey hosts today over 1.6 million refugees who have fled from the violence caused by ISIS. President Erdogan affirmed that the growth of Islamophobia in Europe is one of the consequences which lead to the emergence of extremist groups such as ISIS,

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>6</sup> “Pope’s first day in Istanbul boosts hopes of unification”, *Hurriyet Daily News*, 29 November 2014, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/video-pope-francis-in-istanbul-for-second-leg-of-historic-visit.aspx?pageID=238&nID=74987&NewsCatID=359> (12.12.2014)

<sup>7</sup> Laura Smith-Spark and Arwa Damon, “Pope Francis urges religious tolerance on rare Turkey visit”, *CNN*, 28 November 2014, <http://edition.cnn.com/2014/11/28/world/europe/turkey-pope-visit/> (15.12.2014).

<sup>8</sup> Ionuț Iordăchescu, „<<Sultanul>> Erdogan, ieșire virulentă, în timpul vizitei Papei Francisc”, *DC News*, 29 November 2014, [http://www.dcnews.ro/sultanul-erdogan-ie-ire-virulenta-in-timpul-vizitei-papei-francisc\\_460947.html#sthash.bELdO806.dpuf](http://www.dcnews.ro/sultanul-erdogan-ie-ire-virulenta-in-timpul-vizitei-papei-francisc_460947.html#sthash.bELdO806.dpuf) (15.12.2014).

warning that Muslims' rejection from Europe is a contributing factor to youngster's radicalization and to their assemble into violent coalitions<sup>9</sup>. Turkey's President also added that all those who feel defeated, oppressed or abandoned could be manipulated by terrorist organizations<sup>10</sup>.

Despite the fact that President Erdogan implemented some programs for actively supporting Christians – such as the enactment of a law for the restitution of assets arbitrarily seized by the State or granting the permission for Christian religion classes to be taught in schools – he has constantly stressed his Islamic identity, his political supporting base being conservative Muslim<sup>11</sup>.

Pope Francis argues that Turkey, by its history, should be an example for promoting an 'encounter of civilizations'. Likewise, he emphasized that Turkey has the vocation of being 'a natural bridge between two continents and diverse cultures'. In the presence of Pope Francis, President Erdogan expressed his concern towards the serious and rapid growth of Islamophobia, demanding both Christians and Muslims to fight together for stopping this tendency: 'Between the Muslim world and the Christian one prejudice is developing. Islamophobia is gravely and rapidly growing. We should act together against the perils which are threatening our planet: intolerance, racism and discrimination'<sup>12</sup>.

At the same time, the Argentinean Pope has pointed out the fact that world's most acute challenges in current political context require solidarity from all men of goodwill. He also called for a constructive dialogue to be carried on with Islam, based on friendship and mutual respect. Inspired by common values, Muslims and Christians are called to work together for the sake of justice, peace and respect of each person's dignity and rights, especially in those regions where they have been living in peacefully coexistence and where they are nowadays enduring together the horrors of war<sup>13</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> Caroline Wyatt, "Pope Francis tries to build bridges in sceptical Turkey", *BBC*, 2 December 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-30273812> (04.12.2014).

<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>12</sup> Viorica Marin, „Papa Francisc, vizită istorică în Turcia”, *Adevărul*, 28 November 2014, [http://adevarul.ro/international/asia/papa-francisc-vizita-istorica-turcia-1\\_54786e6fa0eb96501e2b1468/index.html](http://adevarul.ro/international/asia/papa-francisc-vizita-istorica-turcia-1_54786e6fa0eb96501e2b1468/index.html) (08.12.2014).

<sup>13</sup> "Ecumenical blessing and signing of the common declaration", 30 November 2014, [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2014/november/documents/papa-francesco\\_20141130\\_turchia-firma-dichiarazione.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2014/november/documents/papa-francesco_20141130_turchia-firma-dichiarazione.html) (14.12.2014).

‘To this end, it is essential that all citizens – Muslim, Jewish and Christian – both in the provision and practice of the law, enjoy the same rights and respect the same duties’, Pope Francis said in front of the conservative President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his Government<sup>14</sup>.

### **The Pope and the Orthodox Church**

After the Mass on the 29<sup>th</sup> of November, Pope Francis met with the Patriarch of Constantinople, with whom he held a moment of silence at the Patriarchal Church of St. George<sup>15</sup>.

According to the Pope, the task of constructing a better world in which war and misery would not become daily phenomena falls particularly in the hands of Muslims and Christians, if one takes into account the common elements between the two religions: ‘the adoration of the All-Merciful God, reference to the Patriarch Abraham, prayer, almsgiving, fasting... elements which, when lived sincerely, can transform life and provide a sure foundation for dignity and fraternity. Recognizing and developing our common spiritual heritage – through interreligious dialogue – helps us to promote and to uphold moral values, peace and freedom in society. The shared recognition of the sanctity of each human life is the basis of joint initiatives of solidarity, compassion, and effective help directed to those who suffer most’<sup>16</sup>.

In a message read in the presence of the Ecumenical Patriarch of the Eastern Orthodox Church, Pope Francis called for the union of the two churches, pleading for equality between the two religious communities: ‘the Catholic Church does not intend to impose any conditions except that of the shared profession of faith. Further, I would add that we are ready to seek together, in light of Scriptural teaching and the experience of the first millennium, the ways in which we can

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<sup>14</sup> Viorica Marin, „Papa Francisc, vizită istorică în Turcia”, *Adevărul*, 28 November 2014, [http://adevarul.ro/international/asia/papa-francisc-vizita-istorica-turcia-1\\_54786e6fa0eb96501e2b1468/index.html](http://adevarul.ro/international/asia/papa-francisc-vizita-istorica-turcia-1_54786e6fa0eb96501e2b1468/index.html) (08.12.2014).

<sup>15</sup> Mihaela Moise, „Papa Francisc le cere creștinilor din Orient să nu se excludă unii pe alții”, *Agerpres*, 29 November 2014, <http://www.agerpres.ro/externe/2014/11/29/papa-francisc-le-cere-crestinilor-din-orient-sa-nu-se-excluda-unii-pe-altii-19-09-45> (14.01.2015).

<sup>16</sup> „Papa Francisc: Liderii religioși trebuie să arate că respectul reciproc și prietenia sunt posibile”, *Chatolica*, 29 November 2014, <http://www.catholica.ro/2014/11/29/papa-francisc-liderii-religiosi-trebuie-sa-arate-ca-respectul-reciproc-si-prietenia-sunt-posibile/> (09.01.2015).

guarantee the needed unity of the Church in the present circumstances'<sup>17</sup>. Moreover, he asserted that the voices in the contemporary world which are asking for unity between the two churches can no longer be ignored, voices which are urging all Christians to entirely assume their role as disciples of Jesus Christ<sup>18</sup>.

In Pope's vision, both catholic and orthodox religious leaders have a great spiritual and moral task. Good relationship and kind dialogue between them serve as a clear message for various religious communities showing at the same time that, in spite of the differences, mutual respect and friendship are possible. This friendship, besides being an achievement in itself, acquires a special significance and subsequent importance in times of crisis, such as the present one, and we are referring to contemporary crises which are becoming real tragedies for entire nations<sup>19</sup>.

On the other side, Patriarch Bartholomew emphasized the fact that the persecutors are not taking into account one's allegiance<sup>20</sup>; therefore convergent actions of the two churches are imperiously required.

Furthermore, the two spiritual leaders expressed their common concern regarding the present situation in Iraq, Syria and in the whole Middle East, indicating that they themselves are united in the struggle for peace, stability and their desire for promoting dialogue and reconciliation as forms of preventing conflicts. Although they have acknowledged all the efforts made to offer assistance in this area, they have requested all capable state structures to increase their support for suffering communities and consequently allowing Christians to stay in their homeland<sup>21</sup>. In their common declaration, signed in the last day of the visit, Pope Francis and the Patriarch affirmed: 'We cannot resign ourselves to a Middle East without Christians, who have professed the name of Jesus there for two

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<sup>17</sup> Lelia Bretan, „Turcia: Papa Francisc pledează pentru unitatea bisericilor catolică și ortodoxă”, *Agerpres*, 30 November 2014, <http://www.agerpres.ro/externe/2014/11/30/turcia-papa-francisc-pledeaza-pentru-unitatea-bisericilor-catolica-si-ortodoxa-12-59-58> (16.12.2014).

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>19</sup> „Papa Francisc: Liderii religioși trebuie să arate că respectul reciproc și prietenia sunt posibile”, *Chatolica*, 29 November 2014, <http://www.catholica.ro/2014/11/29/papa-francisc-liderii-religiosi-trebuie-sa-arate-ca-respectul-reciproc-si-prietenia-sunt-posibile/> (09.01.2015).

<sup>20</sup> “Ecumenical blessing and signing of the common declaration”, 30 November 2014, [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2014/november/documents/papa-francesco\\_20141130\\_turchia-firma-dichiarazione.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2014/november/documents/papa-francesco_20141130_turchia-firma-dichiarazione.html) (14.12.2014).

<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*.

thousand years'<sup>22</sup>. In the same way, the Holy Father underlined the decadence in which the world seems to progressively sink: 'Many of our brothers and sisters are being persecuted and have been forced violently from their homes. It even seems that the value of human life has been lost, that the human person no longer matters and may be sacrificed to other interests. And, tragically, all this is met by the indifference of many'<sup>23</sup>.

In a message read in front of the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, in the last day of his visit, the Holy Father launched an appeal for the unity of the Catholic and Orthodox Churches, emphasizing that victims of war and youngsters are insistently asking for this historical step to be made: 'The one thing that the Catholic Church desires, and that I seek as Bishop of Rome...is communion with the Orthodox Churches'<sup>24</sup>.

Further, Pope Francis reaffirmed that there is a need to encourage the cooperation of all society's structures, starting with governments and political or religious leaders up to civil society representatives, and all men and women of goodwill, pointing up the vital role that religious leaders could play in this endeavor<sup>25</sup>. Furthermore, the spiritual leaders of the two churches have made an appeal to all religious leaders to continue the consolidation of interreligious dialogue and to make all possible efforts for the sake of constructing a culture of peace and solidarity between individuals and peoples<sup>26</sup>.

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<sup>22</sup> Paul Filimon, „TURCIA: Papa Francisc și patriarhul Bartolomeu cer respectarea dreptului internațional în Ucraina”, *România Liberă*, 30 November 2014, <http://www.romanalibera.ro/actualitate/international/video--turcia--papa-francisc-si-patriarhul-bartolomeu-cer-respectarea-dreptului-international-in-ucraina-359386> (08.12.2014).

<sup>23</sup> “Pope Francis: Muslim leaders should condemn terrorism”, *BBC*, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-30265996> (18.12.2014).

<sup>24</sup> Paul Filimon, „TURCIA: Papa Francisc și patriarhul Bartolomeu cer respectarea dreptului internațional în Ucraina”, *România Liberă*, 30 November 2014, <http://www.romanalibera.ro/actualitate/international/video--turcia--papa-francisc-si-patriarhul-bartolomeu-cer-respectarea-dreptului-international-in-ucraina-359386> (08.12.2014).

<sup>25</sup> “Visit to the President of the Diyanet at the Department for Religious Affairs”, 28 November 2014, [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2014/november/documents/papa-francesco\\_20141128\\_turchia-presidenza-diyanet.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2014/november/documents/papa-francesco_20141128_turchia-presidenza-diyanet.html) (07.01.2015).

<sup>26</sup> “Ecumenical blessing and signing of the common declaration”, 30 November 2014, [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2014/november/documents/papa-francesco\\_20141130\\_turchia-firma-dichiarazione.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2014/november/documents/papa-francesco_20141130_turchia-firma-dichiarazione.html) (14.12.2014).



**Figure 3. Christians in the Middle East**, „Pope Francis: Muslim leaders should condemn terrorism”, *BBC*, 30 November 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-30265996> (18.12.2014).

The Holy Father demanded for collaboration between all Christians to reduce and prevent suffering – severe malnutrition, unemployment, social exclusion – endured by so many people in conflict regions, sufferings which could lead to an increase in criminal activities or even to recruitment of the needy by terrorist groups<sup>27</sup>. At his meeting with the refugees, on 30 November, he assured

<sup>27</sup> “Divine liturgy”, 30 November 2014, [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2014/documents/papa-francesco\\_20141130\\_divina-liturgia-turchia.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2014/documents/papa-francesco_20141130_divina-liturgia-turchia.html) (22.01.2015).



them that there are many ongoing actions for improving their tragic situation and that the general effort has been intensified in order to put an end to the conflicts that are causing not only futile bloodshed but also immense material damages<sup>28</sup>.

In the press conference held at his return from Turkey, Pope Francis made a clear distinction between nation and government policies, specifying that there is a gulf between what a religion proposes and the way in which dogma is applied, governments being held responsible for this misconception<sup>29</sup>.

## Conclusions

Pope Francis' visit to Turkey has represented an action to show the support for the important Christian segment which finds itself under the incidence of the terrible terrorist group ISIS. By this act, the Supreme Pontiff has also tried to consolidate his relationship with the Patriarch Bartholomew I and with the Orthodox Church. The two leaders were already in a friendly relationship, and this meeting came to smooth the asperities created by a Vatican official's statement according to which the fall of communism wasn't completely positive, since it created some tensions between the Roman Catholic Church and the Russian Orthodox Church.

This three-day visit to Turkey has had an important ecumenical and interreligious aspect, coming as a continuity of the special attention that the last popes have been showing these last decades to the Patriarch of Constantinople.

The Pope made serious efforts to attain reconciliation with the Muslim world, not long ago affirming that 'authentic Islam and the proper reading of the Quran are opposed to every form of violence'.

It must be underlined the fact that Pope's visit came on Saint Andrew's Day and has a profound symbolic meaning: Andrew, who has Christianized a good proportion of today orthodox territory, has been St. Peter's brother whose succession is claimed by the Pope. Therefore, this could be a symbolic message of brotherhood between the Catholic and the Orthodox world. The Supreme Pontiff

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<sup>28</sup> "Greeting to young refugees assisted by the salesians", 30 November 2014, [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2014/november/documents/papa-francesco\\_20141130\\_turchia-oratorio-salesiano.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2014/november/documents/papa-francesco_20141130_turchia-oratorio-salesiano.html) (12.01.2015).

<sup>29</sup> "In-flight press conference of his Holiness Pope Francis from Istanbul to Rome", 30 November 2014, [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2014/november/documents/papa-francesco\\_20141130\\_turchia-conferenza-stampa.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2014/november/documents/papa-francesco_20141130_turchia-conferenza-stampa.html) (23.01.2015).

talked about this, showing that Andrew and Peter were brothers in faith, they have walked together toward hope – and they were not left disappointed<sup>30</sup>.

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<sup>30</sup>“Ecumenical prayer”, 29 November 2014, [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2014/november/documents/papa-francesco\\_20141129\\_turchia-preghiera-ecumenica.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2014/november/documents/papa-francesco_20141129_turchia-preghiera-ecumenica.html) (12.01.2015).

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