

Peaceful Pope Francis Offers Strong Words About Stopping Radical Islam

Pope Francis said on Monday the international community would be justified in stopping Islamist militants in Iraq but that it should not be up to a single nation to decide how to intervene in the conflict.

The leader of the world's 1.2 billion **Roman Catholics** made his comments in an hour-long conversation with reporters aboard a plane returning from a trip to South Korea that ranged from international diplomacy to his health and future travel plans.

During the media encounter that has become a tradition at the end of his foreign journeys, Francis, 77, also said he planned to visit the United States next year and that he was ready to go to China "tomorrow" if the communist government allowed him.

He said he realized he had to slow down and be more "prudent" with his health and that he has learned how to handle the superstar status he has gained since taking office last year by thinking of his errors and his own imminent mortality.

Francis was asked if he approved of U.S. strikes against **Islamist State** insurgents who have recently forced Christians and other minorities to flee their homes in Iraq.

"In these cases, where there is an unjust aggression, I can only say that it is legitimate to stop the unjust aggressor," he said.

Proclaiming a caliphate straddling Iraq and Syria, the militants have swept across northern Iraq, pushing back Kurdish regional forces and driving tens of thousands of

Christians and members of the Yazidi religious minority from their homes.

The pope was careful not to give the impression that he was giving an automatic green light for military strikes, but he did not rule them out. He said the situation was grave and the international community had to respond together.

“I underscore the verb ‘to stop’. I am not saying ‘bomb’ or ‘make war’, but stop him (the aggressor). The means by which he can be stopped must be evaluated. Stopping the unjust aggressor is legitimate,” he said.

“One single nation cannot judge how he is to be stopped, how an unjust aggressor is to be stopped,” he said. He said the United Nations was the proper forum to consider whether there was unjust aggression and how to stop it.

Willing to Go to Iraq

The pope disclosed that he had considered going to Iraq after his return from Korea, but decided against a visit for the time being. “At this moment, it would not be the best thing to do, but I am willing to do it,” he said.

He has sent a senior cardinal to Iraq to visit refugees and distribute Vatican charity funds and sent a letter to U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon about the need to stop the bloodshed.

Francis said he wanted to go Philadelphia in September 2015 for a meeting of Catholic families and hinted that the trip might well include a visit to the White House and Congress in Washington D.C. and the United Nations in New York.

That trip, which would be his first to the United States, could also be expanded to include Mexico, he said, but no decision had been taken.

During his five-day visit to South Korea, Francis sent several

signals to China, which does not allow Catholics to recognize the pope's authority, saying the communist government there should not fear Christians because they did not want to "come as conquerors" but be integral parts of local cultures.

On the plane, he said the Vatican was always open to dialog with Beijing, calling the country "noble and wise", but said that the Church needed to carry out its mission in freedom.

Poking fun at himself several times, Francis said that his custom of not taking vacations outside the Vatican was one of his "neuroses." He said he had slowed down for the summer by reading more, sleeping more and listening to music.

"Now I have to be more prudent, you are right," he told a reporter, who reminded him that he had been forced to cancel several events at the last minute in the past few months because of minor ailments or illnesses.

Francis said he did not let fame go to his head by thinking of his "sins and mistakes" and remembering that "this will last a short time, two or three years, and then we go to the house of the father" (God).

The pope, who stood for the entire, hour-long conversation, then made a chopping gesture with his hand and a whistling sound as if to say death comes sooner or later for everyone.

Editing by Crispian Balmer

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