Pope Francis Goes to Egypt to Improve Muslim-Catholic Relations

Pope Francis will make a trip to Egypt next month, the Vatican said on Saturday, giving the pontiff another opportunity to promote better relations between Catholics and Muslims.

Francis has accepted an invitation to Cairo on April 28-29 from President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, Catholic bishops, the pope of the Coptic church of Alexandria and the country's highest Islamic authority, Al-Azhar, the Vatican said in a statement.

Christians, mostly Orthodox Copts, account for about 10 percent of Egypt's population, which is overwhelmingly Sunni Muslim. Sectarian violence sometimes erupts over disputes on issues related to church building, religious conversions and interfaith relationships.

Francis has put great emphasis on improving inter-faith relations since his election in 2013, and a year ago, he met the grand imam of Al-Azhar, Sheikh Ahmed al-Tayeb in the Vatican.

That meeting unfroze relations after Al-Azhar, a 1,000-year-old mosque and university center, cut contacts with the Vatican in 2011 over what it said were repeated insults towards Islam from Francis's predecessor, Pope Benedict.

Benedict had denounced what he called "a strategy of violence that has Christians as a target" following a bomb attack outside a church in the Egyptian city of Alexandria that killed 23 people.

A bombing at Cairo's largest Coptic cathedral killed at least

25 people and wounded 49 in December.

Pope Francis has urged an end to what he called a “genocide” against Christians in the Middle East, but he has also said it is wrong to equate Islam with violence.

Looking to set an example for Europe, he has taken in Muslim refugees fleeing the war in Syria.

In Cairo, Egyptian President Sisi issued a statement on the pope’s forthcoming visit.

“Egypt welcomes Pope Francis and looks forward to this significant visit to strengthen peace, tolerance and inter-faith dialog as well as to reject the abhorrent acts of terrorism and extremism,” Sisi said. {eoa}