



# The Holy See

---

APOSTOLIC JOURNEY OF HIS HOLINESS FRANCIS  
TO CYPRUS AND GREECE  
(2-6 DECEMBER 2021)

***PRESS CONFERENCE ON THE RETURN FLIGHT TO ROME***

*Papal flight*  
*Monday, 6 December 2021*

**[Multimedia]**

---

**Matteo Bruni**

Good morning, Your Holiness! Good morning and thank you for guiding us during these intense days, even to touch at first hand those realities that you have called “wounds”. And thank you also for this moment to be able to speak about it together. Thank you.

**Pope Francis**

Good morning and thank you. I was afraid that this would not work out, because of the delay, but it seems that it works. Thank you so much, I will listen to your questions.

**Matteo Bruni**

Thank you, Your Holiness, the first question is from Constandinos Tsindas of Cypriot television.

**Constandinos Tsindas, Cyprus Broadcasting Corporation**

Your Holiness, thank you for this opportunity and for your visit to Cyprus and Greece. Your Holiness, your strong remarks on ecumenical and interreligious dialogue in both Cyprus and

Greece have raised at the international level challenging expectations. They say apologizing is the hardest thing to do. You have done it in a spectacular way. But what is the Vatican planning to do in practical terms in bringing together Catholic and Orthodox Christianity? Is there a Synod planned?

Being synodal is the substance of Christianity, which originates from the Trinity and results in the common voice of the Church in the world. As we have seen, only a united Church in a globalized and dehumanized environment can be truly effective. Saint John Chrysostom, who, as you said, is an example of the osmosis between Greek thought and Christianity, said that “in human terms, the Church is clergy and laity, whereas for God we are all his flock.

Along with the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, you called all Christians to celebrate in 2025 the 1,700th anniversary of the first Ecumenical Synod of Nicaea. How is this process moving forward?

And finally (sorry for this long question, but it's in the spirit of your journey), a vision was recently expressed in the EU: we have replaced “Happy Christmas” with “Happy holidays”. Why don't people realize that Christianity is not an ideology but a life experience that seeks to bring human beings from mortal time to eternity. So I exist, because my fellow human can also exist. It is the we and not the I. Thank you, Your Holiness.

## **Pope Francis**

Yes, thank you. I did apologize; I apologized before Ieronymos, my brother Ieronymos. I asked forgiveness for all the divisions that there are among Christians, but above all those that we Catholics provoked. I also wanted to apologize, because when we look at the war of independence — Ieronymos pointed this out to me — some Catholics sided with European governments to prevent Greek independence. On the other hand, on the islands, the Catholics of the islands supported independence, they went to war; some gave their lives for their country. But the centre, let's put it that way, at that moment sided with Europe.... And also to ask pardon for the scandal of division, at least for those things for which we are to blame. The spirit of self-sufficiency. We keep our mouths shut when we feel that we should apologize, but it always makes me think that God never tires of forgiving, never. We are the ones who tire of asking forgiveness, and when we do not ask God for forgiveness, it will be hard for us to ask it of our brothers and sisters. It is more difficult to ask forgiveness from a brother or sister than from God, because we know that he says: “Yes, now go your way, you are forgiven.” Instead, with our brothers and sisters, there is shame and humiliation. But in today's world, we need an attitude of humility and apology. So many things are happening in the world, so many lives lost, so many wars... How can we not apologize?

Returning to this, I wanted to apologize for the divisions, at least for those that we caused. For the

others, it is their leaders who must do so, but I apologize for ours and also for that episode in the war where some Catholics sided with the European governments, and those on the islands went to war to defend.... I don't know if that's enough (to answer your question).

And one last apology — this one comes from my heart — an apology for the scandal of the tragedy of the migrants, for the scandal of so many lives drowned at sea.

### **Matteo Bruni**

His second question was on the synodal aspect, and he writes: The Church is synthesis, in human terms, we are clergy and laity, whereas for God we are all one flock.

### **Pope Francis**

Yes, we are one flock, it is true. This division — clergy and laity — is a functional division, yes, of competence. But there is a unity, a single flock and the interplay of differences within the Church is synodality, that is, (a process of ) listening to one another and moving forward together, *Syn odòs*: moving forward way together. This is the sense of synodality that your Orthodox Churches and the Eastern Catholic Churches have preserved. Instead, the Latin Church had forgotten the Synod, it was Saint Paul VI who restored the synodal path, 54, 56 years ago, and we are journeying towards the habit of synodality, of walking together.

### **Matteo Bruni**

And the last question, instead, was about Christmas, and he says: Is it possible that we don't understand that Christianity is not an ideology but a life experience? They want to cancel Christmas.

### **Pope Francis**

Ah, you are referring to the European Union document on "Christmas".... It is an anachronism. This is what so many dictatorships have tried to do throughout history: think of Napoleon, think of the Nazi dictatorship and the Communist dictatorship.... It is a sort of watered-down "laicity".... It is something that historically has not worked. This makes me think of something that, speaking of the European Union, I believe is necessary. The European Union has to take in hand the ideals of the founding Fathers, which were ideals of unity, of greatness, and to be attentive not to open the door to forms of ideological colonization. This could end up dividing countries and lead to the failure of the European Union. The European Union must respect each country as it is internally structured, the variety of countries, and not seek to standardize. I think it will not do so, that was not its intention. But be careful, because sometimes they come and throw out projects like this one there and they do not know what to do.... Each country has its own peculiarity, but each country is open

to the others. The European Union: its own sovereignty, that of brothers and sisters within a unity that respects the uniqueness of each country. And to be careful not to be vehicles of ideological colonization. This is why that statement about Christmas is an anachronism.

### **Matteo Bruni**

Thank you, Your Holiness. The second – or third question – comes from Iliana Magra of Kathimereni, a Greek newspaper.

### **Iliana Magra, Kathimirini**

Good morning, Holy Father. Thank you for your visit to Greece. During your speech at the Presidential Palace in Athens, you spoke about the “retreat” of democracy around the world and in particular in Europe....

### **Iliana Magra**

Could you elaborate a bit on that and tell us which countries you were referring to? And what would you say to far-right leaders and voters around Europe who profess to be devout Christians while at the same time promoting undemocratic values and policies?

### **Pope Francis**

Yes, Democracy is a treasure, a treasure of civilization, and it must be treasured, it must be protected. And not only protected by a superior entity, but among countries themselves, protecting the democracy of others.

Against democracy, today I perhaps see two dangers: one is that of populism, which is here and there, and is beginning to show its teeth. I am thinking of one great populism of the last century, Nazism. Nazism, was a populism that by defending national values, so it claimed, ended up annihilating democratic life, indeed even killing people, annihilating them, it became a blood-stained dictatorship.

Today I will say – because you asked about right-wing governments – let’s be careful that governments — I am not saying right-wing or left-wing, I am saying something else — do not slip down this slope of populism, of so-called political populisms, which have nothing to do with “popularisms”, which are the free expression of peoples, who manifest their own identity, their folklore, their values, their art, and preserves its identity.

Populism is one thing, “popularism” another. On the other hand, democracy is weakened, it embarks on a path of slow decline, when when national values are sacrificed, watered down in the

direction – let’s use an ugly word, but I can’t find another one – of an “empire,” a kind of supranational government. This is something that should make us think.

Neither should we fall into populism, where the people — but it is not the people, but a dictatorship of “us and not the others” — think of Nazism, nor fall into watering down our identities in an international government. On this, there is a novel written in 1903. You are going to say “how behind the times is this Pope when it comes to literature!” A novel written by Benson, an English writer, “The Lord of the Earth” or “The Lord of the World” — it has both titles — who dreams of a future in which an international government with economic and political measures governs all the other countries, and when you have this kind of government, he explains, you lose freedom and you try to achieve equality among all; this happens when there is a superpower that dictates economic, cultural and social behaviour to the other countries.

Democracy is weakened by the danger of populism, which is not “popularism” (which is good), and by the danger of these referrals to international economic and cultural powers... That is what comes to mind, but I am no political scientist, I am saying what I think.

### **Matteo Bruni**

Thank you, Your Holiness. The third question comes to us from Manuel Schwarz of DPA, (Deutsche Presse-Agentur) the German news agency.

### **Manuel Schwarz, Deutsche Presse-Agentur**

Holy Father, first of all thank you for letting us go with you on this important journey. Migration is a central theme not only in the Mediterranean, but also in other parts of Europe, especially in Eastern Europe these days, with so much “barbed wire” as you called it. And also with the crisis in Belarus. What do you expect from the countries in this area? Poland, for example, and also Russia. And what do you expect from other important countries in Europe? For example, in Germany, where there will now be a new government after the era of Angela Merkel.

### **Pope Francis**

On those people who prevent immigration or close the borders — now it is fashionable to build walls, to set up barriers of barbed wire, *concertinas* [curled barbed wire] — the Spanish know what this means — to prevent access. The first thing I would say if I had a leader in front of me is: “Think about when you were a migrant and they wouldn’t allow you to enter, when you wanted to escape your land... and now you’re the one building walls.”

This works because those who build walls lose the sense of their own history, their own story, of when they were the slave of another country. Not everyone has this experience, but at least a

large part of those who build walls have this experience of having been slaves.

You may say to me: but governments have the duty to govern and if such a wave of migrants comes, you cannot govern". I will say this. Every government must clearly say: "I can receive many." Because the leaders know how much they are able to receive. It is their right, this is true. But migrants must be welcomed, accompanied, promoted, and integrated. If a government cannot do this, it must enter into dialogue with others and let others be concerned, each of them. And this is important. The European Union, because the European Union is able to coordinate between all governments for the distribution of migrants. Think about Cyprus. Think about Greece. Think about Lampedusa. Think about Sicily. Immigrants are coming and there is no coordination among the countries of the European Union to send this one here, that one there, this one here ... This basic coordination is missing.

And then, the last word I said was *integrated*, right? They must be welcomed, accompanied, promoted, and integrated. Why integrated? Because if you do not integrate the migrant, this migrant will have a ghetto citizenship. An example, I'm not sure if I have said it on the plane before, is the example that strikes me the most, the Zaventem tragedy. The young people responsible for the slaughter at the airport were Belgian, but the sons of migrants who were ghettoized, not integrated. If you don't integrate the migrant — with education, with work, with care for migrants — you risk creating a guerrilla fighter, someone who will do these things to you. It is not easy to welcome migrants, it is not easy to solve the problem of migrants, but unless we solve the problem of migrants, we risk making a shipwreck of civilization. Today, in Europe — as things stand — not only are the migrants being shipwrecked in the Mediterranean, but our civilization is too.

This is why the representatives of European governments need to come to an agreement. For me, a model of reception and integration in its time was Sweden, which welcomed all the Latin American migrants of the military dictatorships — Chileans, Argentinians, Uruguayans, Brazilians — and integrated them. Today I was in a school here in Athens, and I looked over at the translator and said: "But here there is — I used a household word — there is a fruit salad of cultures. They are all mixed together." And he said to me: "This is the future of Greece". Integration. Integration is growing. It is important.

And then another dramatic situation I would like to mention. When migrants, before coming, fall into the hands of traffickers who take all the money they have and bring them on the boat. When they are turned away, these traffickers take them. In the Dicastery for Migrants [Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development — Section for Migrants and Refugees], there are videos showing what happens in those places where the migrants returning from those lands are sent to. Just as you cannot welcome them and then leave them, but welcome them, promote them and integrate them, so too if I send back a migrant, I have to accompany him, promote him and integrate him in his own country, not leave him on the Libyan coast. This is cruelty. If you want to

know more about this, ask the Dicastery for Migrants that has these videos. And there is a film — you know of it, for sure — by Open Arms, which is a bit romanticized, but it shows the reality of all those who have drowned. It is a horrific thing, this. But we are risking our civilization, we are risking our civilization!

### **Matteo Bruni**

Thank you, Your Holiness. Now the next question is by a French speaking journalist: Ms Cécile Chambraud, from Le Monde

### **Cécile Chambraud, Le Monde:**

Holy Father, I will ask the question in Spanish for my colleagues. On Thursday, when we arrived in Nicosia, we learned that you had accepted the resignation of the Archbishop of Paris, Archbishop Aupetit. Can you tell us why? And why in such a hurry?

Second question: following the report of an independent commission on sexual abuse, the Episcopal Conference of France has recognized that the Church had an institutional responsibility for what thousands of victims have suffered. They also spoke of the systemic dimension of this violence. What do you think of these statements of the French bishops? What meaning could they have for the universal Church? And, last question, will you receive the members of this independent commission?

### **Pope Francis**

I will start with the second question, then we will come back to the first.

When making these studies, we have to be careful in the interpretations, which should be done by periods of time. When you do it over such a long time, there is a risk of confusing the way the problem was perceived in one time period, 70 years before the other. I just want to say this as a principle: A historical situation should be interpreted with the hermeneutics of that time, not our own. For example, slavery. We say: “it is horrible”. The abuses of 100 years ago or 70 years ago “are horrible”. But the way they were experienced was not the same as today, there was another hermeneutic. For example, in the case of abuse in the Church, covering-up, which is the way that is used – unfortunately – in families, even today, in a large numbers of families, and in neighbourhoods, trying to cover it up. (Today) we say, “no, covering up is not the way to go”. But always interpret with the hermeneutic of that time and not with ours.

This is the first thing. For example, the famous Indianapolis study collapsed due to lack of a correct interpretation: some things were true, others not; they mixed time periods. At this stage, segmenting helps.

As for the report, I have not read it, nor have I heard the comments of the French bishops. I don't know how to answer, really. The French Bishops will come this month and I will ask them to explain the thing to me.

And the first question, on the Aupetit case. I wonder: what did he do, Aupetit, that was so serious that he had to resign? What did he do? Somebody answer me ...

**Cécile Chambraud**

I don't know. I don't know.

**Pope Francis**

If we do not know the accusation, we cannot condemn. What was the accusation? Who knows? [No one replies]. This is bad!

**Cécile Chambraud**

A problem of governance [of the diocese] or something else. We don't know.

**Pope Francis**

Before answering I will say: investigate. Do the investigation ... because there is a danger of saying: "He was condemned". Who condemned him? "Public opinion, gossip..." But what did he do? "We don't know, something..." If you know the reason why, say so, otherwise, I cannot answer. And you will not know why, because it was a failing on his part, a failing against the sixth commandment, but not total but of pittle caresses and massages that he did: that was the accusation. This is sin, but one of the more grave sins, because sins of the flesh are not the gravest sin: the gravest sins are those that have more of an "angelic" character; pride, hatred... these are the most grave. So Aupetit is a sinner, just as I am. I don't know if you feel that way, but perhaps... as was Peter. The Bishop on whom Christ founded the Church. How on earth did the community of that time accept a sinful bishop? And that was with sins with such an angelic character, such as denying Christ! But it was a normal Church, always accustomed to feeling sinful, everyone. It was a humble Church. You can see that our Church is not used to having a bishop who is a sinner, and we pretend to say "my bishop is a saint". No, this is Little Red Riding Hood. All of us are sinners. But when gossip grows, grows, grows, and takes away a person's reputation, that man will not be able to lead because he has lost his good name, not because of his sin, — which is a sin, like Peter's, like mine like yours: it is a sin! — but because of the gossip of the people responsible for reporting things. A man who has lost his good name so publicly cannot govern. And this is an injustice. That is why I accepted Aupetit's resignation, *not* on the altar of truth, but on the altar of hypocrisy. This is what I want to say. Thank you.



**Matteo Bruni**

Thank you, Your Holiness, maybe we have time for another question. It is on the part of Vera Shcherbakova of Tass.

**Pope Francis**

Ah, good for you! The successor of Alexey Bukalov ... He was good.

**Vera Shcherbakova**

Yes, I miss him a lot. I say it often. Thank you very much, Holy Father, for your attitude towards our Bulgakov, who is a treasure of our Russia and of our agency. But I wanted to ask the following: On this trip, you have seen the heads of Orthodox Churches. You said some beautiful words about communion and reunification. So when will your next meeting with Patriarch Kirill be? What are the common projects with the Russian Church? And what difficulties, even, do you see in this process of drawing closer? Thank you.

**Pope Francis**

Thank you. That is a good question.

A meeting with Patriarch Kirill is not far from the horizon. I think next week [Metropolitan] Hilarion is coming to me to arrange a possible meeting. Because the Patriarch has to travel — I do not know where, maybe in Finland, but I'm not sure — I am always available, I am also willing to go to Moscow: to talk to a brother, there is no need of protocols. A brother is a brother before all protocols. And I with an Orthodox brother, whether his name is Kirill, or Chrysostomos, or Ieronymos, is a brother — we are brothers, we talk to one another face to face. We do not waltz around; no, we say things face to face. But as brothers. Is it nice to see brothers arguing: it is beautiful, because they belong to the same Mother, Mother Church, but they are a bit divided. Some because of heredity, some because of a history that divided them... but we must go together and try to work, and walk in unity and for unity.

I am grateful to Ieronymos, to Chrysostomos, to all the Patriarchs who have this desire to walk together. In unity ... the great Orthodox theologian Zizioulas, studying eschatology, once said jokingly that “we will find unity in the eschaton”; that is where there will be unity. It's a bon mot. It does not mean that we have to stand still waiting for the theologians to come to an agreement, no. It is an aside, quip, it is what they say Athenagoras told Paul VI: “Let us put all the theologians on one island and we go somewhere else”. A witticism. But, theologians should continue to study, because this is good for us, it leads us to understand one another better, and find unity. But in the meantime, we move forward together. But how? By praying together, engaging in works of charity

together. For example, I think of Sweden, of their Lutheran-Catholic Caritas, they work together. Work together and pray together. This we can do. As for the rest, let the theologians do it, since we do not understand how to do it. This we can do: unity begins today, on this path.

**Matteo Bruni**

Thank you, Holy Father. Thank you for the time you wanted to devote also to our questions. I think that we are, more or less, in time for lunch.

**Pope Francis**

Thank you very much, and enjoy your lunch.

**Matteo Bruni**

Some journalists wanted to give you a copy of the Acropolis of Athens, the Parthenon, because they were sorry that you didn't get to see it up close.

**Pope Francis**

Yes, there was a risk that I would leave without seeing it [the Parthenon], and last night I said: "No, I want to see it!". They brought me there, I saw it from a distance, illuminated. At least I saw it. I didn't set foot there, but I said: "Thank you for this kindness".