



# The Holy See

---

APOSTOLIC JOURNEY OF HIS HOLINESS POPE FRANCIS  
TO THE UNITED ARAB EMIRATES  
(3-5 FEBRUARY 2019)

**PRESS CONFERENCE ON THE RETURN FLIGHT FROM ABU DHABI TO ROME**

*Papal flight*  
*Tuesday, 5 February 2019*

---

**[Multimedia]**

GISOTTI

Good afternoon, Holy Father, good afternoon to all of you. We journalists often use the adjective 'historic' and at times they tell us that we use it a little too frequently; however, perhaps for this Journey it's appropriate. Many have used it in numerous different languages. The Journey has been brief in terms of time, but with a truly far reaching perspective, and everyone hopes that the seeds of these days will bear enduring fruits. A Journey that a few hours ago saw the encounter with many peoples: the local organizers said there were nearly 100 nationalities present. And yesterday this *Document*, of extraordinary value, a surprise, but one of those surprises that I imagine our colleagues were pleased to report, given its importance. I don't know if before the questions, Holy Father, you would like to offer a brief introduction.

POPE FRANCIS:

First of all, good afternoon, and thank you for your company. This trip has been too short, but it has been a great experience. I think that every Journey is historic, and even each single day of ours provides an opportunity to write about our daily history. No history is small, none. Every history is great and worthy, and even if it is bad, its dignity hidden, it can always emerge. Thank you very much for your cooperation.

GISOTTI:

Let's begin with the questions, as is traditional, beginning with the local journalists. This *Document*, which is so rich in content, gives rise to many questions and much reflection. The first to ask a question, Holy Father, is Imad Atrach from "Sky News Arabia".

IMAD ATRACH:

Your Holiness, what will the results of this Journey be, and what is your impression of the country, of the United Arab Emirates?

POPE FRANCIS:

I saw a modern country. I was struck by the city, the cleanliness of the city.... And also the little curiosities: how do they water the flowers in this desert? It is a modern country, that welcomes so many people here. It is a country that looks to the future. For example, among other things, children's education: they are educated while always looking to the future. That is the explanation I received. Then, another thing that struck me is the issue of water: they are seeking for the future, the near future, to use sea water and make it drinkable, and likewise moisture from the humid air... They are always seeking new things. And I also heard from someone: "One day there will be no petroleum, and we are preparing for that day, because we will have something more to do". This is a country that looks to the future. Then, to me it seems a country that is open, not closed. Religiosity too: Islam is an open Islam, not closed, of dialogue, an Islam of fraternity and peace. On this point I emphasize the vocation to peace that I felt is present, despite there being the issues of some conflicts in the area, but I felt this. Then, the meeting with the wise men [the Council of Elders], with the wise men of Islam, something that was profound; they came from many places, many cultures. This further indicates the openness of the country to a form of regional, universal and religious dialogue. I was also struck by the interreligious meeting: a powerful cultural event; and — I mentioned this in the address — by what they did last year regarding the protection of children in the media, on the Internet. Because, in effect, today child pornography is an 'industry' which is lucrative and exploits children. This country realizes this and has taken positive steps. Of course there will be issues and negative aspects, but in a Journey of less two days these things are not seen and, if they are, one looks the other way... Thank you for the welcome.

GISOTTI:

Now Nour Salma from "Emirates News Agency" will ask the next question.

NOUR SALMAN:

Your Holiness, thank you so much for this opportunity. The question that we have to ask is: now that the Abu Dhabi Declaration for human fraternity has been signed, how will this document be

applied in the future? And what are your thoughts on His Highness Mohammed Bin Zayed announcing the building of the church of Saint Francis and the mosque of the Imam Ahmed El-Tayeb?

POPE FRANCIS:

The *Document* was prepared with much reflection and indeed prayer. Both the Grand Imam with his team, and I with mine, prayed a great deal to make this *Document* come to fruition. Because for me there is only one great danger at this moment: destruction, war, hatred among us. And if we believers are not able to shake hands, embrace, kiss one another and pray, then our faith will be defeated. This *Document* springs from faith in God who is Father of all and Father of peace and [it] condemns all destruction, all terrorism, from the first instance of terrorism in history, which is that of Cain. It is a *Document* that developed over almost a year, moving back and forth, prayer... But it matured in this way, discreetly, so as not to deliver the child before its time, so it would mature. Thank you.

GISOTTI:

Holy Father, before the next question there is a gift from the journalist from Alittihad [offering a painting to the Holy Father]. Joerg Seisselberg from the German, "ARD", will ask the next question.

JOERG SEISSELBERG:

Holy Father, it was a Journey filled with encounters, impressions, images. Also the image of your arrival has stayed in my mind: you were welcomed with military honours, with military airplanes that traced the Vatican colours in the sky. I ask myself: how does one reconcile this with Pope Francis, with the Pope who comes with a message of peace? What do you feel and what do you think at these moments? And also on this topic: your appeal for peace in Yemen. What reactions have you received in your meetings that lead you to hope that this message will be received, that they will take steps towards real peace in Yemen? Thank you.

POPE FRANCIS:

Thank you. I interpret all these welcoming gestures as gestures of good will. Everyone does them according to their own culture. And what did I find here? A welcome so great that they wanted to do everything, little things and great things, because they felt that the Pope's visit was a good thing. Someone also called it a blessing: this is something that God knows, but, if I interpret correctly, they perceive it as something good, and they wanted to make known that I was welcome. On the issue of war: you mentioned one of them. I know that it is difficult to offer an opinion after two days and after speaking about the matter with few people; yet I can say that I

have found good will in initiating peace processes. I have found that this [attitude] is to some extent the common denominator when I have spoken about situations of conflict — you mentioned that of Yemen. I found good will to initiate peace processes.

GISOTTI:

Now Domenico Agasso from “La Stampa” will offer his question. It is his second papal flight, but this is his first opportunity to be able to ask you a question during an in-flight press conference. Go ahead, Domenico.

DOMENICO AGASSO:

Holy Father, after yesterday’s historic signing of the *Document* of fraternity, in your opinion, what will the consequences be in the Islamic world, thinking above all about the conflicts in Yemen and Syria? And also, what will be the consequences among Catholics, considering the fact that there is a segment among Catholics who accuse you of allowing yourself to be exploited by Muslims?

POPE FRANCIS:

But not only by Muslims! They accuse me of letting myself be exploited by everyone, even by journalists! It is a part of [my] work. But there is one thing, yes, I would like to say. I openly reaffirm this: from the Catholic point of view the *Document* does not move one millimetre away from the Second Vatican Council. It is even cited, several times. The *Document* was crafted in the spirit of the Second Vatican Council. It was my wish, before making the decision to say: ‘It is fine like this; let’s end it like this’, at least this was my desire, to have it read over by some theologians and also, more officially, by the Theologian of the Papal Household, who is a Dominican, with the fine Dominican tradition, not to go on a ‘witch hunt’, but to see where the right thing is, and it received his approval. If someone feels uncomfortable, I understand this; it is not a daily occurrence, and is not a step backward. It is a step forward, but one that comes after 50 years, from the Council, which must be developed. Historians say that for a Council to sink its roots in the Church it takes 100 years. We are halfway there. And this can create uncertainty, even for me. I will tell you, I saw a phrase [in the *Document*] and I said to myself: “But this phrase, I am not sure if it is certain...”. It was a phrase of the Council! And it surprised me too! In the Islamic world there are different opinions; some are more radical, others not. Yesterday in the Council of Elders there was also at least one Shiite, with a tremendous universality, and he spoke well... It is a process, and processes mature, like flowers, like fruit.

GISOTTI:

Thank you Holy Father. Let us now turn to the French speaking group of Matilde Imberty from Radio France.

MATILDE IMBERTY:

Good evening Holy Father. You have just completed your visit to the Emirates and in a very short time you will be going to Morocco; that too is an important Journey. We seem to understand that you have chosen to speak with very specific Muslim representatives. Is this a deliberate choice? Also, continuing the reference to Islam, the historic *Document* signed yesterday is very ambitious with regards to education: in your opinion, can this really touch the Muslim faithful? Thank you.

POPE FRANCIS:

I know and I have heard from several Muslims that it [the *Document on Human Fraternity*] will be studied in universities, certainly at least in Al-Azhar, and in schools. Studied, not imposed. This [answer] addresses the last part of your question. Then, the proximity of the two trips is somewhat fortuitous because I wanted to go to Marrakesh to the conference [the Global Compact Summit], but there were some protocol issues: I couldn't go to an international conference without first making a visit to the country, and I didn't have the time to do this. This is why we postponed the visit which comes closely after this one. The Secretary of State went to Marrakesh. It is a matter of diplomacy and also courtesy, but it was not planned. In Morocco I will also follow in the footsteps of Saint John Paul II, who visited there. He was the first to go there. It will be an enjoyable visit. Invitations from other Arab countries have also come, but there is no time this year. We will see next year, whether I or another Peter, or someone will go there! Thank you.

GISOTTI:

Maria Sagrario Ruiz from Radio Nacional de España. Thank you.

MARIA SAGRARIO RUIZ

Good evening, Holy Father. I will ask the question in Spanish. Vatican diplomacy has a long history of conducting its diplomacy in small steps with regards to conflict mediation. I wish to recall the year 1978 when John Paul II's mediation avoided a war between Argentina and Chile. We have learned yesterday that there is a letter from Nicolás Maduro, and now we are returning to [the topic of] Venezuela, expressing his wish to return to dialogue; you have the Secretary of State Parolin who knows this country perfectly well. All eyes, many of them, are focused on Pope Francis and on the Vatican. What is the Vatican doing or what is it planning to do? You said that you are available to mediate if they were to ask you. At what point do things stand at this time?

POPE FRANCIS:

Thank you. Mediation between Argentina and Chile was a truly courageous action by Saint John Paul II, who avoided a war that was imminent. There are small steps, and the final one is

mediation. They are small initial steps, facilitators, but not only in the Vatican, in all diplomacy: mutual closeness to open the possibility of dialogue. This is how diplomacy works. I think that the Secretariat of State can better explain all the various steps that can be taken. Before this trip, I knew that a letter from Maduro would arrive by diplomatic pouch. I have not yet read this letter. We will see what can be done. But in order to take, let's say the final step, that of mediation, there must be willingness on both sides: it must be both sides that request it. That was the case with Argentina and Chile. The Holy See in Venezuela was present at the time of the dialogue as was your compatriot, Rodríguez Zapatero: an initial meeting with Mgr Tscherrig, which was then continued by Mgr Celli. There was a lot of effort but nothing concrete. Now, I don't know; I will look at that letter and see what can be done. But the preliminary conditions are that both sides must request it. We are always available. The same thing happens when people go to the parish priest with a problem between a husband and wife. One comes and the first thing said is: "But is the other one coming or not coming? Does the other want to come or not?". Always both parties, this is the secret. The same goes for countries. This is a condition that should make them think before requesting assistance or the presence of an observer or of mediation. Both sides, always. Thank you. And... I will go to Spain!

GISOTTI:

Nicole Winfield from Associated Press will now ask you a question.

NICOLE WINNFIELD:

Holy Father, last week 'L'Osservatore Romano's women's magazine published an article that reported the sexual abuse of consecrated women in the Church — adult women, sisters — by the clergy. Some months ago the International Union of Major Superiors also made a public complaint about this problem. We know that the meeting at the Vatican in a few weeks will address the abuse of minors but can we expect the Holy See to do something to face this problem too, perhaps a document or some guidelines? Thank you.

POPE FRANCIS:

I will answer this. Stay here, but I just want to conclude talking about the trip and then the first question I will answer will be yours. Is that alright?

GISOTTI:

So while Nicole stays here, Maria Angeles Aconde from Rome Reports joins us.

MARIA ANGELES ACONDE:

'Buenas tardes' Holy Father. I ask you a question on behalf of the Spanish speaking group. You had a meeting with the Council of Elders. As much as possible, can you tell us what subjects were discussed and whether you are returning to Rome with the impression that your message was received by them?

POPE FRANCIS:

The Elders are truly wise. The Grand Imam spoke first, then each of them, beginning with the eldest who spoke in Spanish as he is from Mauritania and learned it there, an elder in his 80's, right up to the youngest one who is the secretary and spoke little, but said everything by means of a video, his expertise; he is a communicator. I liked this meeting, it was something very fine indeed. They began by using a keyword: "wisdom", and then "fidelity". They emphasized that it is a journey of life in which this wisdom grows and fidelity is strengthened, and from there friendship among peoples arises. They were of different ... I'm not sure how explain it: one was a Shiite, others with different nuances... And this path of wisdom and fidelity leads you to building peace, because peace is the work of wisdom and fidelity, human fidelity among peoples and all this. I was left with the impression of having been in the midst of truly wise men: and having this Council is something the Grand Imam can truly rely on.

ANGELINA:

You are satisfied, I imagine ...

POPE FRANCIS:

Yes, I am very satisfied, thank you.

GISOTTI:

We also have Sofia Barbarani of "The National: which is a very important newspaper for Abu Dhabi.

SOFIA BARBARANI:

Good day. The question that we wanted to ask you, from the Abu Dhabi newspaper was: today a young girl brought you a letter — we saw her — she ran to you when you were in the car. We wanted to know if you had already read the letter and if you knew what it said ...

POPE FRANCIS:

I had no time. The letters are there. They are classifying them so they can be read later.

SOFIA BARBARANI:

And can you tell us what impression you had when you saw the girl come towards you?

POPE FRANCIS:

That little girl is brave! She was stopped, and I said, “No, let her come!”. That child has a future, she has a future! And I’d dare say: poor husband! [the Holy Father laughs as do the journalists]. She has a future, she’s brave. I liked it, because it takes courage to do this. And then another one followed her, there were two of them: she saw the other one and took courage.

GISOTTI:

So, there are other questions about the trip: Inés San Martín and Franca Giansoldati, if you are very quick.

FRANCA GIANSOLDATI:

Your Holiness, Imam El-Tayeb spoke; he denounced Islamophobia, fear of Islam. Why wasn’t something heard about ‘Christianophobia’, or in any case about the persecution of Christians?

POPE FRANCIS:

Actually I spoke about the persecution of Christians, not at that moment, but I am speaking about it often. Also on this Journey I spoke — I don’t remember where — but I spoke about it. I don’t know, I believe that the *Document* was more [about] unity and friendship, and I emphasized this. Now it comes to mind: the *Document* expresses condemnation, condemnation of violence. And some groups that call themselves Islamic — even if the wise say that that is not Islam — persecute Christians. I remember that father with three children in Lesbos. He was no more than thirty years old and he was crying, and he said to me: “I am Islamic, my woman, my wife, was Christian, and the ISIS terrorists came; they saw the cross, and they told her: ‘Convert!’ And she said: ‘No, I am Christian’. And they slit her throat in front of me”. This is the daily bread of terrorist groups. Not only towards Christians, but also the destruction, the destruction of the person. That is why the *Document* expressed strong condemnation in that sense.

GISOTTI:

Always [questions] about the Journey: Inés San Martín of “Cruz”.

INES SAN MARTIN: (in Spanish)



Holy Father, a question that is actually related to the one that my colleague has just asked, because we did not have time to coordinate it. But, as I said on the last trip, I had the opportunity to interview the Archbishop of Mosul in Iraq, who always says that they are waiting for you and denies that the bishops are discussing it, rather that that they are simply waiting for you. You spoke of religious freedom, you spoke of religious freedom going beyond freedom of worship. Can this be expounded upon? Because today we were, or here we are, returning from a country that is known for its tolerance, yet today many of the Catholics who were in the sports centre, today for the first time were able to be open about their faith and their beliefs from the moment they arrived in the United Arab Emirates. So can there be a change that goes beyond just today?

POPE FRANCIS (in Spanish):

Processes have beginnings, don't they? You can prepare an act, carry it out there, and then there's a before and an after. I believe that freedom is always in process, it must always be progressing, continuously growing, it doesn't have to stop. I was impressed by a conversation I had before leaving — with a 13-year-old boy in Rome who wanted to see me, he wanted to see me and so I waited for him and he said to me: "Well, I find some things interesting, but I want to tell you that I [continues in Italian] I want to tell you that I am an atheist. What do I have to do as an atheist to become a man of peace?". I said to him, "Do what you feel", and I spoke to him a little. But I liked the boy's courage: he is an atheist but he's looking for goodness, he is seeking this path. This is also a process, a process that we must respect and accompany. To accompany all the processes for good, everyone, whatever "colour" they are. And these I believe are steps forward. Thank you.

GISOTTI:

Holy Father, time is coming to an end. But there is an answer to give....

POPE FRANCIS:

It is true; the mistreatment of women is a problem. I would dare say that humanity has not yet matured, the woman is still considered "second class". Let's start from here: it is a cultural problem. Then we get to the femicides. There are countries in which the mistreatment of women gets to the point of femicide. And before getting to your actual question, [I will recount] a curious thing that I was told, but you can investigate to see if it's true or not. I was told that the origin of female jewellery comes from a very ancient country — I don't know, in the East — where there existed a law to expel a woman, to dismiss her [to repudiate her]. If her husband, in that country — I don't know if it is true or not — told her: "Go away", at that moment, however dressed, she had to leave, without taking anything [with her]. And thus the women began to make jewellery, of gold and precious stones, to have something on which to survive. I don't know if it is true or not, but it is interesting. Do the research. Now your question [on the abuse of religious sisters by clerics]. It

is true, within the Church there have also been clerics who have done this; in some cultures it is somewhat more prevalent than in others; it is not something everyone does, but there have been priests and even bishops who have done it. And I believe it may still be happening, because it doesn't cease just by becoming aware of it. It continues this way. We have been working on this for some time. We have suspended a few clerics, dismissed them, for this. And also — I don't know if the trial is over — we had to dissolve some female religious congregations that were highly linked to this, a form of corruption. I cannot say: "In my house there is no such thing...". True. Should something more be done? Yes. Do we have the will to do it? Yes, we do. But it is a journey that goes further back [in time]. Pope Benedict had the courage to dissolve a congregation of a certain standing, because there had been a form of manipulation of women, even sexual manipulation by the clerics or the founder [as explained by the interim director of the Press Office, the Holy Father, in using the term 'slavery', meant 'manipulation', a form of abuse of power that is also reflected in sexual abuse]. Sometimes the founder takes away freedom, deprives the sisters of freedom, and it can come to this. With regard to Pope Benedict, I would like to stress that he is a man who had the courage to do very many things about this. There is an anecdote: he had all the papers, all the documents, about a religious organization that had internal sexual and financial corruption. [As a Cardinal] he went, and there were filters, and he could not get there. In the end the Pope [Saint John Paul II], wanting to understand the truth, had a meeting, and Joseph Ratzinger went there with the file and all the papers. And when he [Ratzinger] returned he said to his secretary: "Put it in the archive, the other party won". We must not be scandalized by this, they are steps in a process. But then, when he became Pope, the first thing he said was: "Bring those papers from the archive", and he began... The folklore about Pope Benedict portrays him as so good, yes, because he is good, kind — a piece of bread does more harm than he does. He is good! But it [this folklore] also portrays him as weak, and instead he is anything but weak! He was a strong man, a man consistent in things. He started... And there, in that congregation, there was this problem that you mention. Pray that we can move forward. I want to go forward... There are cases, in some congregations, new ones in particular, and in some regions more than others. Yes, this the issue. We are working [on it].

GISOTTI:

Thank you, Holy Father. And thanks to all of you. But there is a surprise ending for a colleague who has reached a very important milestone.

POPE FRANCIS:

They told me that we're celebrating the 150th 'birthday' of Valentina [Alazraki, on her 150th Papal Journey]! [The Holy Father laughs and there is general laughter]. But I don't see her that mummified! She is a woman with interesting roots. I once said to her, "If you go for a blood sample, you'll embarrass the haematologist!".

Thank you so much! Pray for me, don't forget, I need it. Thank you!

---

Copyright © Dicastero per la Comunicazione - Libreria Editrice Vaticana