



Asian Journal of Religious Studies

“The Lord is truly among us.”

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Contents

Editorial: A Message of Peace	3
Foolish Bridesmaid or Wise Bridesmaid	5
<i>Jimmy B Dhabhi SJ</i>	
Historical Perspective on Jesuits' Contribution to Astronomy: From Rachol and Beyond	11
<i>Franky Fernandes</i>	
Serving the Nation as Serving the Church.....	25
<i>Nelson Joy Anthony</i>	
Serving the Church and the Nation: Challenging Opportunities.....	40
<i>Jegan Xavier Franklin G</i>	
Building New Humanity through Faith: Republic Day Message 2019	63
<i>George Pattery SJ</i>	



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Editorial

A Message of Peace

Pope Francis celebrated a historic Catholic mass in the United Arab Emirates on Tuesday, February 5, 2019 is part of a landmark trip that saw the first-ever papal visit to the Arabian Peninsula, the birthplace of Islam.

UAE officials say that Francis’s public mass in the capital city of Abu Dhabi drew about 4,000 Muslims and about 135,000 people total – many of them Catholic migrants from places such as the Philippines and South America. They’re part of a large migrant community in the oil-rich country that works building gleaming new towers or as domestic help, often under harsh or discriminatory conditions.

Pope Francis, who has been under pressure over priest sexual-abuse scandals in the Catholic Church, delivered a message of humility and faith to the crowds that came to hear his mass (delivered in Italian and translated to Arabic and English) or to cheer on the pontiff as he made the rounds in his Popemobile, writes Jen Kirby in Vox

“Let us look at how Jesus lived: poor in respect to things, but wealthy in love; he healed so many lives, but did not spare his own,” Pope Francis said in his homily. “He came to serve and not to be served; he taught us that greatness is not found in having but rather in giving.”

Pope Francis’s visit and his mass were a remarkable and very public show of Catholic faith in a region that is not particularly known for religious tolerance.

The UAE is more tolerant of different religions than some of its neighbors in the Gulf, particularly Saudi Arabia. Though the UAE's constitution establishes Islam as the country's official religion, it also "guarantees freedom of worship as long as it does not conflict with public policy or morals," according to a 2017 State Department report. Christian churches as well as Hindu and Sikh temples operate on land donated by the ruling family, the State Department report notes.

But the country is still far from a bastion of religious freedom. There are strict laws against proselytizing by non-Muslims; blasphemy and converting from Islam are strictly prohibited and those who do so face harsh punishments, potentially including the death penalty. Anti-Semitic literature and sentiment is prevalent, particularly on social media, and discrimination against followers of the minority Shi'a sect of Islam is not unheard of.

The UAE has dedicated this year to "tolerance," promoting openness to people and cultures from around the world. (There's even a Minister of Tolerance.) Pope Francis's visit seemed to fit squarely with this campaign, as well as within the pontiff's own outreach to the Muslim world.

Pope Francis spoke out against conflict in the region, including the war in Yemen, which is supported by UAE. On Monday, in front of an audience of Emirati and other religious leaders, Pope Francis signed a statement on "human fraternity," promoting peace among nations, races, and religions, with the religious leaders of Islam.

In his remarks, the pontiff condemned violence, saying, "War cannot create anything but misery; weapons bring nothing but death." Can we not learn this lesson for India and promote peace and harmony between all religions?

At AJRS, we are delighted to welcome **Rev Fr Arturo Sosa SJ**, Superior General of the Society of Jesus, to Pune on March 5 2019. The next issue will cover his memorable visit.

The Editor