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Pope Benedict XVI calls for Holy Land's religious leaders to reject hatred

Pope Benedict XVI urged religious leaders in the Holy Land to reject hatred and live in peace, holding hands and singing with Muslims and Jews in the hometown of Jesus.

By Tim Butcher in Jerusalem
Published: 5:53PM BST 14 May 2009



Pope Benedict XVI meets with religious community leaders in Israel, at the Church of the Annunciation Photo: AP

In a poignant and spontaneous moment during a visit to Nazareth, the Pope rose to his feet and grasped the hands of fellow religious leaders inside the Basilica of the Annunciation as a rabbi sang a peace song that he had composed for the pontiff.

"Lord grant us peace," a smiling Benedict said in English, as Rabbi Alon Goshen-Gottstein soulfully sang "Shalom, Salam, Lord grant us peace" at the end of an inter-faith meeting of Christians, Jews and Muslims of the Galilee.

On the penultimate day of his visit to the Holy Land, the Pope later met the Israeli prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, for talks in the Franciscan convent adjacent to the basilica.

Benedict has twice used public speeches during his visit to support the idea of the creation of a new nation, Palestine, alongside Israel.

Until recently this view was at least nominally supported by the government of Israel although Mr Netanyahu has rejected the idea, saying that Palestinians should not receive their own state but a more limited form of self-government.

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Speaking ahead of the talks, an Israeli official said his government had refused a Vatican request to issue multi-entry visas to 500 priests from Arab countries during the papal visit.

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Father Federico Lombardi, the Pope's spokesman, tersely said this was "clearly one of the points of long discussions"

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After the meeting, Israeli radio reported that Mr Netanyahu had reminded the pontiff of the calls by President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad of Iran for Israeli to be "wiped off the map", with the pontiff saying he condemned such sentiment as forcefully as he did anti-Semitism.

In the morning the Pope celebrated mass for 40,000 people in Nazareth, a once predominantly Christian town that has seen clashes with a fast-growing Muslim population.

"Let everyone reject the destructive power of hatred and prejudice, which kills men's souls before it kills their bodies," he said.

"Nazareth has experienced tensions in recent years which have harmed relations between its Christian and Muslim communities.

"I urge people of good will in both communities to repair the damage that has been done, and in fidelity to our common belief in one God, the father of the human family, to work to build bridges and find the way to a peaceful coexistence."

The problems in Nazareth are symbolic of Christianity's waning footprint in the Holy Land. A once substantial population bloc, Christians now represent, for example, less than five per cent of the population of modern Israel.

The throng, made up of local Christian Arabs as well as many foreign Christians, had gathered from dawn for a special mass at an amphitheatre constructed at Mount Precipice.

There were coachloads of men and women from the Philippines, one of the most staunchly Catholic countries, who are allowed to live in Israeli as domestic workers.

After three days of events where security considerations had kept the Pope apart from the general public, the event in Nazareth had a more open atmosphere to it.


The mood of the crowd was positive although local health workers said 30 people had to be treated for the effects of the punishing early summer sun.

The Popemobile got its longest run of the visit, trundling through the massed crowd who waved flags and strained to catch a glimpse of the pontiff behind the vehicle's bullet-proof glass.

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