

The Pope's journeys

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When Pope Francis last week visited Turkey, he drew attention to the thousand-year old schism in the Catholic Church, with an estimated three hundred million adherents in the Eastern Orthodox (Catholic) Church and totally about some nine hundred thousand in the rest of the Catholic Church (and a similar number in the Protestant Church). Most Orthodox are in Eastern and Southern Europe, the Middle East and Russia. When the Orthodox Church was established it was mainly to be independent from the Pope, similar to what happened five hundred years later when the Anglican Church was established in England.

The Patriarch of Constantinople is usually considered the leader of the whole Orthodox Church, the Eastern Catholic Church, and the Pope, the leader of the Roman Catholic Church. Yet, several patriarchs, such as the Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia, along with the bishops, are independent leaders, overseeing the church's activities and interpretation of doctrine in their synods. The two branches of Catholicism represent the differences between East and West.

Now, Pope Francis has invited the Orthodox Church back 'into the fold' - without any conditions, he said. That was a great gesture from the larger of the two churches. But for a minority group, wouldn't it still be giving up some identity to join the main group?

At the same time, I believe that the Orthodox Christians are at least as much in need of modernization and reform as the rest of the Catholic Church. Different opinions and groups within a large faith association, or a secular organization for that matter, are essential. Debate and questioning make an organization stronger. Diversity of opinions and renewal within a 'broader whole' can only be good. I also believe the Pope sees it the same way.

The Orthodox Church and the rest of the Catholic Church should expand their dialogue and cooperation, but also cherish diversity. They should debate issues and learn from each other, and they should also expand their dialogue with the Protestant Church and other groups. Ecumenical and inter-faith dialogue is necessary to learn from the various faith traditions, customs and cultural expressions. In our democratic time and age, we should not fear each other. We should welcome new and opposing views, not to change entirely but also not make differences larger than needed. We must cherish and encourage dialogue as well as diversity.

Last weekend, there was a large referendum in Switzerland to decide on future immigration policies: should the country be open or closed to foreign workers and immigrants, not just let them come as tourists and visitors? The referendum clearly showed that people were overwhelmingly in favor of 'openness to the world' instead of 'selfish separateness' - to put it in more crisp words. We must all be glad that the Swiss were sensible and not as outdated as some had feared, indeed as the politicians who had proposed the agenda topic might have been. Now, Switzerland has the potential to become more inclusive than it has ever been. Or maybe the Swiss themselves and foreigners just perceived them to be exclusive rather than inclusive?

A few days before the Swiss referendum, and his visit to Turkey, the Pope also visited Brussels to talk to the European Union leaders, elected politician and bureaucrats. He put the issue of immigration squarely on the agenda, emphasizing a much more positive approach towards the newcomers. He turned the arguments the other way than what is 'in' in most of the European countries (perhaps except for Switzerland then). Today, voters and politicians seem to look for all kinds of ways of keep the immigrants out, or reduced the influx. If they come and

stay, they are blamed for many ills, such as taking advantage of the welfare system and claiming social benefits when they could have earned money themselves. And if they stay for good, they are expected to become like the hosts.

The right-wing wind has blown over Europe for a while now, and it has gained some support, such as seats in the parliaments, and support in opinion polls – including in the otherwise liberal Scandinavian countries. The Pope rightly reminded the EU that immigrants are not a problem, they are an asset. And if they are not integrated in a good and positive way, we should not blame it on the newcomers (only). We should rather blame it on the cultural, political and administrative systems of the host countries. In other words, the Pope lectured the Europeans; he challenged them in one of the most controversial political fields today.

When the UK Prime Minister David Cameron gave his major speech on immigration last week, he softened his earlier stand; he didn't any longer suggest limited quotas of immigrants from within Europe to the UK. Today, there is free movement of people within EU. Instead, he said that social benefits should be less to newcomers, such as no unemployment benefits unless the immigrant had already contributed into the welfare kitty. However, he said that issues of immigration are causing real concern, but he also admitted that immigrants are essential to UK's own prosperity. Thus, he came closer to the Pope's views than most had expected, notably that people must not only be allowed to move, but be welcomed and appreciated, and helped to settle into their new land. After all, immigrants and everyone else want to contribute to their own success and that of the land they live in. The negative image that is often given of immigrants is in most cases wrong.

And then, does all this have anything to do with us in Pakistan? Yes, it does. European and American tolerance and openness are taken as a model to people everywhere in the world. Even today, in 'Asia's century', when China and other countries in the region grow faster than the 'old world', the liberal standards of the West are listened to. That applies to religion, too.

It is a concern to all that there are fewer Christians in the Muslim countries than before, and they are often treated as second class. In the West, there is a growing number of Muslims, and I believe the modern secular states want to treat them well, and integrate them as equal citizens, but still with Christianity being culturally dominant.

In Pakistan, we can learn from the Pope's recent journeys, where we have repeated conflict-cases between Muslims and Christians, and within Islam, and getting tired of the many Afghan refugees who are still here. I sometimes miss an all-Pakistan leader of Islam, to include Christians and other faiths, too – somebody who can talk like the Pope.

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