

EXPLORE

MAKING HISTORY

As this issue of Flashes went to press, the UAE was preparing for the first major event to fall under the nation's Year of Tolerance.





Reflecting the nation's position as "a global capital for tolerance and humanitarianism", the UAE was preparing for a historical occasion as this issue of *Flashes* went to press – the visit of two of the world's most prominent religious leaders.

His Holiness Pope Francis, the Head of the Catholic Church and Sovereign of the Vatican City, and His Eminence the Grand Imam of al-Azhar Sheikh Ahmed el-Tayeb were due to visit the UAE from 3 – 5 February.

The landmark visit – which comes as the UAE celebrates 2019 as the Year of Tolerance – marks the first time a Pontiff has visited the GCC and is the first time any Papal visit has coincided with a religious figure as significant as the Grand Imam. It comes after His

Holiness Pope Francis and His Eminence the Grand Imam accepted the invitation of His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan, the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi and Deputy Supreme Commander of the UAE Armed Forces.

The visit is "a further milestone in the UAE's commitment to promoting the human fraternity and shared values of tolerance and humanitarianism, and the peaceful coexistence of all people and religions," said state news agency WAM.

"In the 47 years of the UAE's existence, the nation has been proud to promote co-existence among its multinational population and hosting this visit and its commitment to human fraternity is a testament

EXPLORE

to the nation's ongoing doctrines of peaceful coexistence, tolerance and human values, driven by open interfaith dialogue," added WAM.

"The joint visit is a highly significant occasion for the UAE in 2019, which has been declared The Year of Tolerance in the UAE, to further strengthen the nation's role of encouraging stability and prosperity in the region."

More than 135,000 people from across the UAE and neighbouring countries were expected to attend a Papal Mass at the Zayed Stadium, in Abu Dhabi, on 5 February – one of the largest single gatherings ever held in the UAE.

His Holiness Pope Francis, and His Eminence the Grand Imam were also scheduled to meet His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan, the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi and Dep-

"The willingness of us all, Emiratis and foreigners, to engage with people different from ourselves in a spirit of respect and empathy has ensured our success"

HE SHEIKH NAHYAN BIN MUBARAK AL NAHYAN
UAE MINISTER OF TOLERANCE

uty Supreme Commander of the UAE Armed Forces, for bilateral meetings and discussions. They were expected to visit the Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque and founding father of the nation Sheikh Zayed's tomb together. The Pontiff was also planning to meet with the Muslim Council of Elders.

UAE officials met Pope Francis in the Vatican in 2017 to discuss the importance of promoting tolerance worldwide. The delegation was headed by Her Excellency Sheikha Lubna Al Qasimi, who held the position of UAE Minister of State for Tolerance at the time. During the visit, HE Sheikha Lubna described the UAE's "philosophy of tolerance" and emphasised the need to promote communication and understanding of religions and cultures.

Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, Vice President and Prime Minister of the UAE and Ruler of Dubai, said Pope Francis' visit to the UAE would "strengthen our ties and understanding of each other, enhance interfaith dialogue and help us to work together to maintain and build peace among the nations of the world".

Welcoming Pope Francis' visit, the UAE's current Minister of Tolerance, His Excellency Sheikh Nahyan bin Mubarak Al Nahyan said: "We are proud to welcome him as a friend, as an advocate for global



peace and dialogue and as a representative of a great world religion.

“The visit of Pope Francis to the United Arab Emirates will reinforce the peace with which we have been blessed,” he added. “We Emiratis have welcomed the world to the United Arab Emirates. Our remarkably diverse population lives and works in peaceful and productive harmony, sheltered safely by a welcoming Arab tent.

“The willingness of us all, Emiratis and foreigners, to engage with people different from ourselves in a spirit of respect and empathy has ensured our success. We talk to one another. We learn from one another. We have come to understand and accept our differences. We have discovered the values that we share.”

The UAE has a long and proud history of inter-faith dialogue and freedom of religious expression, and the first Catholic Church in the country was established in Abu Dhabi in 1965. Archeologists have also found

The book is “the first of its kind delivering an important message of tolerance”

remains of a church and monastery on Sir Bani Yas Island dating back to the 7th century.

Inter-faith dialogue and freedom of religious expression in the UAE is also the focus of a new book, authored by Reverend Andrew Thomson. A diverse group of faiths collaborated in producing the book, titled *Celebrating Tolerance: Religious Diversity in the United Arab Emirates*, which serves as a compendium of their experiences of coexisting peacefully in the country.

Representatives of each faith provide a brief overview of its migration to the UAE in the early 1960s and 1970s with an understanding of its rituals. Envisioned by Reverend Thompson from the Anglican Church, in Abu Dhabi, the book is “the first of its kind delivering an important message of tolerance; a testament to the country’s highly tolerant views and acceptance of a very diverse group of people who come from all over the world”.

Reverend Thomson, who was born in the UK, was awarded an MBE in 2011 for promoting inter-faith dialogue between Christians and Muslims.

“Tolerance is a virtue and an intrinsic part of the Islamic culture,” states the UAE government. “It is observed at all levels: individual, organisational and national. With more than 200 nationalities living peacefully and successfully in the UAE, the UAE society has been an undisputed example of being a tolerant and inclusive country.”†

His Eminence the Grand Imam of al-Azhar Sheikh Ahmed el-Tayeb and His Holiness Pope Francis at the Vatican in 2016