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A man walks in the shade at Istiqlal mosque as the spires of the Our Lady of the Assumption Cathedral are seen in the background, in Jakarta, Indonesia, Aug. 9. (AP/Tatan Syuflana)

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When Pope Francis begins his Asia tour next week, one of his early stops will be at Indonesia's iconic Istiqlal mosque.

The 87-year-old head of the Catholic Church will hold an interfaith meeting with representatives of the country's six officially recognized religions as the populous Southeast Asian nation faces growing challenges to its tolerant image.

Francis, who has experienced a slew of health problems and has become increasingly reliant on a wheelchair, has a rigorous schedule during his four-nation visit. He will start his trip in Jakarta on Sept. 3, where he will meet Indonesian President Joko Widodo.

In Istiqlal mosque, the Argentine Jesuit, known for promoting religious dialogue, will meet delegates of Islam, Buddhism, Confucianism, Hinduism, Catholicism and Protestantism. Indonesia's constitution recognizes the latter two as separate religions. About 87% of the country's 280 million people are Muslim, however, it has the third-largest Christian population in Asia after the Philippines and China. Only 2.9% of the total population is Catholic.

The mosque of Istiqlal, which means independence in Arabic, is the largest in Southeast Asia, covering more than 22 acres (9 hectares). Its name is a constant reminder of the country's fight against Dutch colonialists, who ruled it for nearly 350 years.

Across from the mosque lies the Roman Catholic neo-Gothic Our Lady of the Assumption Cathedral in Jakarta. The proximity of the two houses of worship is symbolic of how religions can peacefully coexist, according to official websites.

The mosque and cathedral are linked by an underpass known as the "Tunnel of Friendship," about 28 meters (91 feet) in length and molded after a handshake gesture to symbolize religious tolerance. The pope is expected to walk through the tunnel.

Istiqlal mosque's Grand Imam Nasaruddin Umar told the Associated Press that Francis choosing Indonesia as the first stop of his Asian visit makes "the Muslim community proud." He also said they will use the pope's visit "to discuss the common ground between religious communities and emphasize the commonalities between religions, ethnicities and beliefs."

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Umar acknowledged that an "increasingly plural society" like Indonesia can face more challenges, "but we need to know we live together under God."

While Indonesia's constitution guarantees freedom of religion, over the past several years, its perception as a moderate Muslim nation has been undermined by flaring intolerance, from the imprisonment of Jakarta's Christian governor for blasphemy, which resulted in a series of protests in 2016, to the canings of gay men in Aceh, a province that practices its version of Islamic Shariah law. There were also reports of violence against religious minorities, and some faith groups have been unable to secure building permits for places of worship.

Meanwhile, Cantika Syamsinur, a 23-year-old college student who had just finished praying in Istiqlal mosque and was on her way to the cathedral, said she welcomed the pope's visit and the interfaith meeting. "There are many religions in Indonesia and I hope we respect each other."

Francis will be the third pope to visit Indonesia. The trip was originally planned for 2020 but was called off because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

"Four years of waiting is quite long," said Susyana Suwadie who heads the cathedral's museum, adding she was overwhelmed by emotions as she awaited the pope's visit. "This important historic moment is finally happening."

Some are hopeful the pope's interreligious meeting will propel changes on a grassroots level.

Thomas Ulun Ismoyo, a Catholic priest who is also the spokesperson for the Pope Francis Visitation Committee in Indonesia, said that religious leaders in Indonesia play a significant role because the masses listen to them. He said he hopes the pope's visit "will lead to something good" and advocate for a better world where

humanity and social justice are prized.

Andi Zahra Alifia Masdar, a 19-year-old college student in Jakarta, concurred: "We can be more accepting of each other, more tolerant, and able to live side by side, not always clashing."

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