



North Korea wants a visit from the pope in spite of religious restrictions

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North Korean dictator Kim Jong Un has reportedly invited Pope Francis to visit his country, where religious freedoms are tightly restricted and Catholic priests are prohibited.

What are the details?

A spokesman for South Korean President Moon Jae-in made the announcement ahead of Moon's trip to Europe next week, where he will visit the Vatican and extend Kim's invitation to Pope Francis in person.

"During the meeting with Pope Francis, [Moon] will relay the message from chairman Kim Jong Un that he would ardently welcome the pope if he visits Pyongyang," Kim Eui-kyeom said at a news conference in Seoul on Tuesday.

While North Korea is known as an isolated, "hermit" nation, Kim Jong Un has attended several diplomatic meetings over the past several months, including one with President Donald Trump. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo met with Kim over the weekend, and said that a second meeting between the North Korean leader and Trump would be set up "at the earliest possible date."

Kim has also held a series of talks with Moon, opening up dialogue between the two countries, which have technically been at war for decades.

North Korea remains under economic sanctions while President Trump presses the country for nuclear disarmament.

Is this the first time North Korea has invited the pope?

Time reported that the invitation to Pope Francis is not the first time North Korea has offered to host a papal visit. Kim's father, Kim Jong Il invited then-Pope John Paul II to visit the country in 2000, which the Vatican declined because Catholic priests are prohibited from being in North Korea.

According to AFP, Kim's grandfather, Kim Il Sung, "viewed Christianity as a threat to his authoritarian rule and eradicated it through executions and labor camps."

In 2016, Cato Institute senior fellow Doug Bandow wrote in Forbes that North Korea is "the globe's number one religious persecutor." Bandow cited a report by Christian Solidarity

Worldwide that stated, “Among other basic human rights denied to the people of North Korea, freedom of religion or belief is largely non-existent.”

The CSW detailed some of the barbaric punishments carried out against Christians who are discovered secretly practicing their faith in North Korea, including documented instances of victims “being hung on a cross over a fire, crushed under a steamroller, herded off bridges, and trampled underfoot.”