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## Papal first: Francis visits Pentecostal church

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VATICAN CITY -- Pope Francis has become the first pope to visit a Pentecostal church, pressing his outreach to evangelicals who represent Catholicism's greatest competition for Christian souls around the globe.

Francis flew by helicopter Monday to visit the under-construction Evangelical Church of Reconciliation in the southern city of Caserta. He met privately with Pentecostal preacher Giovanni Traettino, an old friend.

Speaking to some 350 Pentecostal faithful in the church, Francis apologized for Catholic persecution of Pentecostals during Italy's fascist regime, when the practice of their faith was forbidden, and stressed that there was unity in diversity within Christianity.

"Among those who persecuted and denounced Pentecostals, almost as if they were crazy people trying to ruin the race, there were also Catholics," he said. "I am the pastor of Catholics, and I ask your forgiveness for those Catholic brothers and sisters who didn't know and were tempted by the devil."

He acknowledged the remarkable nature of his visit, saying: "Someone will be surprised: 'The pope went to visit the evangelicals?' But he went to see his brothers."

Catholics have often compared Pentecostal groups to cults and accused them of overly aggressive, unethical proselytizing. The popular, charismatic movements have drained parishioners from the Catholic Church, particularly in Francis' own Latin America.

But Francis has met unofficially with several Pentecostal and evangelical preachers recently, including the Texas televangelists James Robinson and Kenneth Copeland. He recorded an iPhone video for a Pentecostal conference hosted by Copeland, whose prosperity gospel ministry — stressing that God will reward the faithful with health and wealth — clashes with Francis' own embrace of the value of a "poor church."

Not all evangelicals or Catholics have welcomed the pope's outreach: Some traditionalist Catholics have sought to minimize the pope's initiative, stressing that Traettino and others represent only their individual churches.

In a statement earlier this month on the eve of the Caserta meeting, several Italian evangelical groups met in the same city and stressed the "incompatibility" of their beliefs with that of the Catholic Church and its pope.

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