

BARI, Italy (AP) — Pope Francis on Saturday denounced the “murderous indifference” that has allowed violence to consume the Middle East and drive tens of thousands of Christians from their homes, calling out global powers for seeking power and profit at the expense of the region’s people during a remarkable gathering of Orthodox patriarchs and Catholic leaders.

Francis hosted the daylong ecumenical service in the Adriatic port city of Bari, considered a religious bridge between East and West and home to the relics of St. Nicholas, an important saint in the Orthodox Christian world.

Francis greeted the patriarchs outside the Basilica of St. Nicholas and together they descended to the crypt to pray before the relics and light a flame for peace symbolizing the unity of Christians divided by over 1,000 years of schism.

“We commit ourselves to walking, praying and working together, in the hope that the art of encounter will prevail over strategies of conflict,” Francis said at the end of the encounter as children released doves of peace.

For years, the Vatican has voiced concern about the plight of Christians driven from Mideast communities that date to the time of Christ. Just last week, Francis

decried intensified attacks in southern Syria that killed scores of people and forced tens of thousands to flee.

The Vatican has also long sought an internationally guaranteed status for Jerusalem that safeguards its sacred character for Jews, Muslims and Christians, and has responded to the U.S. decision to recognize Jerusalem as Israel's capital by urging respect for the status quo of the holy city.

Francis denounced the "occupation" of Mideast lands, and renewed his appeal for a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

"So many conflicts have been stoked too by forms of fundamentalism and fanaticism that, under the guise of religion, have profaned God's name - which is peace - and persecuted age-old neighbors," he said.

Denouncing the weapons trade that fuels the region's wars, he urged global powers to stop their "thirst for profit that surreptitiously exploits oil and gas fields without regard for our common home, with no scruples about the fact that the energy market now dictates the law of coexistence among peoples!"

The meeting was the first of its kind, gathering most of the Middle East's Orthodox patriarchs with the head of the 1.2-billion strong Catholic Church as well as Lutheran leaders and their Christian representatives in the Holy Land. After the public prayer on Bari's seafront, the black-draped patriarchs and white-

cassocked pope met in private inside the basilica and then lunched together, moving around Bari in a bus as if on a school field trip.

In his opening prayer, Francis said the Middle East represented the source of Christianity, where ancient Christian rites and heritage are preserved and where “our very souls are rooted.”

And yet, in recent years the region has been “covered by dark clouds of war, violence and destruction, instances of occupation and varieties of fundamentalism, forced migration and neglect,” he said.

“All this has taken place amid the complicit silence of many,” he lamented. “The Middle East has become a land of people who leave their own lands behind.”

In a service punctuated by Arabic chant, Aramaic prayer and Catholic hymn, Francis said the Orthodox and Catholic leaders wanted to give voice to those who have none.

“Indifference kills, and we desire to lift up our voices in opposition to this murderous indifference,” he said. “For the Middle East today is weeping, suffering and silent as others trample upon those lands in search of power or riches.”

Among the patriarchs on hand was the spiritual leader of the world’s Orthodox Christians, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I, as well as patriarchs from

ancient churches of Alexandria, Antioch and Jerusalem. Notably absent from the gathering was Patriarch Kirill, head of the Russian Orthodox Church, which has been a strong supporter of Russian President Vladimir Putin's military intervention in Syria.

Kirill sent his deputy, Metropolitan Hilarion.

Francis has continued his predecessors' efforts at reconciling with the Orthodox church, and held a historic meeting with Kirill in 2016 in Cuba, the first between a pope and Russian patriarch in over a millennium. Last year, the Vatican authorized the loan of St. Nicholas' relics to Russia, where more than 1 million people viewed them.