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Pope Francis apologises after slapping hand of female worshipper

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Pope Francis has apologised for slapping the hand of a female worshipper who pulled him towards her as he greeted pilgrims in Rome on New Year's Eve.

The 83-year-old pontiff admitted he had lost his patience and set a "bad example" to the world during the unsavoury encounter, which was caught on video.

The incident happened a day before he delivered a New Year's Day speech at the Vatican in which he denounced violence against women, which he compared to profaning God.

During a walkabout in St Peters Square on his way to view its nativity scene, the Pope was seen greeting a crowd of well wishers, smiling and reaching out to them as he passed by the barrier.

Apology

But he reacted angrily after the woman, who has not been identified, seized his right hand and pulled him sharply towards her. He slapped her hand and yanked himself free.

Footage of the incident, which also showed the clearly annoyed pontiff walking briskly away, immediately caused a stir on social media and prompted him to issue an unusual apology.

In an address to the thousands of pilgrims who gathered in the square on Wednesday at the end of the traditional New Year Mass, he departed from his scripted remarks to talk about patience.

"So many times we lose patience – even me, and I apologise for yesterday's bad example," he said.

The Pope earlier used the service to issue a forthright condemnation of the abuse of women in modern society, telling worshippers: "All violence inflicted on women is a desecration of God."

"How often is a woman's body sacrificed on the profane altar of advertising, profit, pornography?" he asked, adding that the female body "must be freed from consumerism, respected and honoured".

Second incident

The pontiff added that despite creating life, women "are continually offended, beaten, raped, forced into prostitution" and compelled to have abortions.

"We can understand our level of humanity by the way we treat a woman's body," he said.

The incident is not the first time that Pope Francis has reacted angrily after being manhandled by an exuberant worshipper, with a similar encounter taking place in February 2016.

During a visit to the city of Morella in Mexico, he lost his footing after being pulled towards the assembled crowd, falling into a disabled man who was sitting in front of the barrier.

Video of the incident showed the exasperated pontiff telling the people responsible: "Don't be selfish". A Vatican spokesman said later it had been a "normal human reaction".

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