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COMMENT - A political pope brings the gospel to South America

-Jim Wyss of the Miami Herald filed this overview from Quito, Ecuador, prior to the Pope's arrival in South America.

Ever since Mario Jose Bergoglio became Pope Francis in 2013, the region's political elite have beaten a path to the Vatican. Cuba's Raúl Castro, Colombia's Juan Manuel Santos and Brazil's Dilma Rouseff have all been granted audiences. Argentina's Cristina Fernández has become a regular at the Holy See, visiting her countryman and one-time foe five times.

In the process, Latin America's first pope has earned a reputation as an effective deal-maker. He's credited with brokering the U.S.-Cuba rapprochement, given his blessing to peace talks in Colombia, and has been urged to intercede on behalf of political prisoners in Venezuela.

However, starting Sunday, it will be Francis, the 78-year-old spiritual leader, who will be present in South America.

The pope is kicking off an eight-day trip in Ecuador that also will take him to Bolivia and Paraguay.

While he traveled to Brazil in 2013 for World Youth Day, that trip had been previously scheduled by Pope Benedict XVI. In that sense, Francis hand-picked Ecuador for his Latin American homecoming, said Archbishop Fausto Gabriel Trávez of Quito, president of the Episcopal Conference.

“This is the first time a pope will be addressing a crowd in Latin America in his own and their own language,” he told the Miami Herald. “That’s a blessing for Ecuador.”

It’s also the beginning of a series of trips in the Western Hemisphere. The pope will travel to Cuba and the United States in September and is planning to visit Chile, Uruguay and Argentina in 2016.

The visit is a much needed boost in a region where Catholicism has been slipping. According to a recent PEW study, 84 percent of all Latin Americans were raised Catholic, but only 69

percent are practicing as Protestant faiths make inroads.

In Ecuador, 79 percent consider themselves Catholic — down from 95 percent in 1970, according to the study. But there has been a Francis effect, Trávez said, with more people packing the pews.

“Pope Francis has definitely created excitement in the community,” he said.

The pope can expect a rock-star welcome. Hotels in Paraguay have been booked for weeks amid the crush of Argentines flowing across the border to see their hometown hero. In chilly Quito, people were preparing to sleep overnight in the park where Francis will hold mass on Tuesday.

The trip takes him to three of South America’s poorest countries. In a video message, Francis said he wanted to deliver the gospel to those most in need, including “the elderly, the sick, the imprisoned, the poor, [and] those who are victims of this throwaway culture.”

In that spirit, Francis will be visiting a nursing home in Ecuador, a pediatric hospital in Paraguay and Bolivia’s most violent jail, Palmasola, in Santa Cruz.

POLITICAL AGENDAS

While Catholic authorities say the trip is strictly religious, Francis is unlikely to escape regional politics.

In Paraguay, he's expected to get drawn into the debate surrounding a 10-year-old girl who was denied an abortion after allegedly being raped by her stepfather. While the case has outraged health advocates, most believe that staunchly Catholic Paraguay will not give in to secular demands.

Government critics also are accusing the Horacio Cartes administration of trying to hide the nation's problems from their illustrious visitor.

"We have to show our reality: the country lacks work, healthcare, homes and education," Eladio Flecha, the secretary of the Pyahurã Paraguay political party, told ABC Color newspaper. "It's very important that we show the pope these things."

In Bolivia, Francis can expect a warm welcome. As a bishop and cardinal in Buenos Aires, he dedicated much of his service to undocumented migrants — many of whom were from the poor neighboring country.

Even so, miners and some transportation workers have threatened to strike while Francis is in town to draw attention to their plight. Families of soldiers who were jailed after a 2014 uprising also have said they will try to petition the pope for their release.

President Evo Morales asked the groups not to “blackmail” the government.

“When we have international visitors, like Pope Francis, our beloved Bolivia is in the world’s eyes,” he said. “It’s our obligation to show hospitality and unity.”

In Ecuador, where four weeks of anti-government protests have stoked tensions, Francis often has been at the center of the battle.

On Thursday, President Rafael Correa held a mass rally to keep anti-government demonstrators from approaching the presidential palace. Surrounded by supporters, he took on those who have criticized his administration for plastering the city with quotes from Francis that reference social justice and equality. (Correa is trying to push an unpopular inheritance tax that he says will help redistribute wealth.)

“Some say we’re manipulating the pope’s visit because all the signs we’ve put up are out of context,” he told the crowd. “Nothing is out of context.”

“Very soon the Latin American bourgeoisie — like the North American bourgeoisie is doing now — will start calling [Francis] a communist,” he added. “The bourgeoisie don’t like what he says but we like it very much and it inspires us.”

Correa’s critics, on the other hand, are hoping the pope will see beyond the rhetoric.

“If the pope recognizes the situation for what it is, perhaps some fundamental principals of democracy can be restored in Ecuador, like space for real dialogue, the need for consensus and for the president to abandon his authoritarian line and create an environment where Ecuadoreans can be in peace,” said Abelardo Pachano, a former Central Bank president.

On Thursday, via Twitter, Organization of American States Secretary General Luís Almagro asked the pope to consider mediating between Ecuador’s forces.

Trávez, with the church, said that’s not in the cards.

“Yes, he has a meeting with the president,” he said, “but that’s purely protocol.”

THE FRANCIS EFFECT

Even so, there are hopes that the pope’s mere presence can work magic.

“There are expectations that the visit will create a ‘parenthesis’ that could be very good for the country and let the dust settle,” said Angel Polibio Cordova, the president of the CEDATOS polling firm. “People think this will be a good time for everybody to reflect on what’s happening — but particularly the president.”

In polls, CEDATOS found that 90 percent favor the pope’s visit.

Opposition groups say they will not hold demonstrations during Francis’ stay, but social media sites are urging critics to scream “Francis yes, Correa no!” at the end of the papal mass in Quito and then march toward the presidential palace. Correa says he may skip the service to keep hecklers from embarrassing the country.

Beneath the political storms are the devout who have been waiting decades for a papal visit. (Pope John Paul II came here in 1985 and visited Bolivia and Paraguay in 1988.)

Andrea Samaniego was just a few days old during the last papal visit. She said her mother held her up in front of the television to get his blessing. On a recent weekday, as she sold tiny Francis dolls in downtown Quito, she worried that the political turmoil might mar the occasion.

“I’m not Catholic but I’ve been very anxious for this Latin American pope to visit,” she said. “He’s charismatic and has a powerful message about unity, which I think is very important for Ecuador considering the circumstances. ... A lot of people were wondering if he was going to cancel his visit because of the protests.”

Diego Rodriguez, a cab driver, said his 6-year-old son has become obsessed with the pope. While he’s wary of facing the crowds at the outdoor mass, his son has been “begging us to take him,” he said.

“He has the beginnings of asthma and he keeps telling us that Pope Francis will cure him,” Rodriguez said.

Patricio Guerrero, a 70-year-old retiree, said that he thought Francis’ arrival would bury Ecuador’s political discord. And he offered a long-term solution for the country.

“The pope should just stay here,” he said.
“Forever.”

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