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Pope Francis' Visit to Mexico in February to Focus on Marginalized

by *Carlos Navarro*

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In visits to South America, the US and sub-Saharan Africa during the past year, Pope Francis urged the global community to pay more attention to the plight of the marginalized. In South America, for example, Pope Francis chose to stop in Bolivia, Ecuador, and Paraguay – the three poorest, most Catholic, and most culturally and ethnically indigenous countries in the region, where he spoke of the need for structural change ([NotiSur, July 31, 2015](#)).

On his six-day trip to sub-Saharan Africa in November, Pope Francis visited Uganda, Kenya, and the Central African Republic, placing a strong emphasis on fighting corruption, ending war and addressing poverty in the region. "Our world has a grave social debt toward the poor who lack access to drinking water, because they are denied the right to a life consistent with their inalienable dignity," the pontiff said during one of his speeches. He also praised Uganda for welcoming more than 500,000 refugees from the war-torn countries of Somalia, Sudan, and the Congo.

During his recent trip to the US, Pope Francis also spoke about inequality. "Even in the developed world, the effects of unjust structures and actions are all too apparent," he said during a joint session of the US Congress in September.

In his speech to the UN, which was part of the US trip, the pope focused on the need for environmental protection, but also on ensuring that any new blueprint for development benefit the marginalized. "The simplest and best measure and indicator of the implementation of the new agenda for development will be effective, practical and immediate access, on the part of all, to essential material and spiritual goods: housing, dignified and properly remunerated employment, adequate food and drinking water, religious freedom, and more generally, spiritual freedom and education," Francis said.

Pope to address indigenous rights, drug violence, migration

The agenda for the pontiff's upcoming visit to Mexico on Feb. 12-18 will apparently place a high priority on many of the same issues. The evidence is in Francis' itinerary, which includes visits to San Cristóbal de la Casas in Chiapas, Ciudad Juárez in Chihuahua, and Morelia in Michoacán. Pope Francis' trip would be the seventh by a head of the Vatican to Mexico. Pope John Paul II visited Mexico on five occasions between 1978 and 2002 ([SourceMex, Aug. 28, 2002](#)) and Pope Benedict XVI traveled to Mexico in 2012.

Pope Francis, an Argentine national whose given name is Jorge Bergoglio, specifically selected Chiapas because of its importance for indigenous rights, while Michoacán was picked because of the impact of drug-related violence, and Ciudad Juárez was selected because of its symbolic significance for migrants.

"Each of those cities has its own particular characteristics, and the choice of the sites is an indication of the emphasis that the pontiff wants to place during his upcoming trip to Mexico: human rights, violence, drug trafficking, corruption, and migration," Newsweek said in its Nov. 15 issue.

The Mexican bishops conference (Conferencia del Episcopado Mexicano, CEM) acknowledged that Pope Francis will come to a country where the people are “stuck in between a situation of despair and a situation of hope,” due to the high levels of violence and social inequality.

“The youth, indigenous communities and migrants are going to be important topics of the papal message,” said Hugo Valdemar, a spokesperson for the Archdiocese of Mexico (Arquidiócesis Primada de México). “He is going to conflictive areas of our country, where other popes have not traveled.”

The CEM pointed out that the pope would be coming to Mexico as a messenger of peace. “He will come to confirm our faith, encourage our hope and strengthen our will to become more charitable,” the CEM said. “We will be urged to commit to construct a Mexico where truth, justice, equity, solidarity, forgiveness, reconciliation, and mercy would make possible a holistic development and a prosperous and peaceful life for our country.”

Pope Francis’ itinerary will also include Mexico City, where he will meet with President Enrique Peña Nieto upon his arrival to the country. The next day he will hold a gathering at the national auditorium with important personalities from the world of culture, science, and academia. Notably, the pope declined an invitation to address the Chamber of Deputies and Senate, unlike his visit to US in September 2015, when he addressed a joint session of the US House and Senate. Cardinal Alberto Suárez Inda, a member of the committee planning the pope’s visit to Mexico, said the pontiff made it known that he does not necessarily want to make an address to the legislative branch a part of his normal itinerary during his trips around the world.

“The deputies and senators can greet the pope at the Palacio Nacional [when he meets with Peña Nieto],” said Suárez Inda, who is the head of the Archdiocese of Morelia.

According to Suárez Inda, Pope Francis will process through the principal streets of Morelia during his visit to the Michoacán capital on Tuesday, Feb. 16. He will travel in an open-air vehicle, as opposed to one with bulletproof glass, even though Michoacán is considered one of the more dangerous states in Mexico. The very dangerous nature of the state, which has been afflicted with extreme violence ([SourceMex, May 29, 2013](#), and [May 27, 2015](#)), is a main reason why Francis added Morelia to his itinerary.

Suárez Inda said security would be tight, but he was not sure how many state and federal police and soldiers would be protecting the pope. “What I know is that this pope is not afraid,” he said. “He is going to travel in a pope-mobile and not in an armored car.”

As part of his trip to Morelia, Pope Francis will offer a Mass at Estadio Venustiano Carranza, greet a group of children at the Catedral de Morelia, and attend a gathering of 90,000 youth at Estadio Morelos.

A highly symbolic visit to San Cristóbal de las Casas

Before traveling to Morelia, Pope Francis will make a stop in the cities of Tuxtla Gutiérrez and San Cristóbal de las Casas in Chiapas state on Monday, Feb. 15. Bishop Felipe Arizmendi Esquivel said the pope is aware of the special significance of San Cristóbal de las Casas, which is the site of the uprising of the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN) in 1994 ([SourceMex, Jan. 12, 1994](#), [Jan. 19, 1994](#), and [Jan 26, 1994](#)). The pope will celebrate a special Mass with members of local

indigenous communities in San Cristóbal de las Casas, said a spokesperson for the Diocese of Tuxtla Gutiérrez.

The Zapatista uprising forced the federal government to enter into negotiations on a set of indigenous rights, applicable not only to native communities in Chiapas but to the entire country ([SourceMex, Feb. 21, 1996](#)). After years of debate, the Congress eventually approved laws that are much weaker than the original rights negotiated between the EZLN and the administration of former President Ernesto Zedillo ([SourceMex, Aug. 22, 2001](#)).

Arizmendi said the pope also views San Cristóbal de las Casas as significant because the city is named after Fray Bartolomé de las Casas, who fought for indigenous rights in Mexico.

During his visit to Chiapas, the pope will also travel to the capital city of Tuxtla Gutiérrez, where he will participate in an event that is centered on youth and families.

Migration the centerpiece of trip to Ciudad Juárez

The pope's trip to Ciudad Juárez will include a meeting with a group of migrants in the border city, a Mass with 10,000 faithful, and a visit with 20 inmates at a local prison, the Centro de Rehabilitación Social (CERESO), which was once considered one of the most dangerous prisons in Mexico. The pope has made a custom of visiting with prisoners, both at home in Italy and during his trips overseas. One of the final activities during his trip to US was to visit a correctional facility in Philadelphia.

Still, the focus of the trip to the border city will be on the plight of migrants. "The problem of migration affects our entire country, from north to south. If he is to speak forcefully on this issue, he had to select a site that is a strong symbol [of the plight of migrants]," said Carlos Aguiar Retes, who heads the Archdiocese of Tlalnepantla in México state.

The Mexican Catholic Church is very much on the same page regarding the issue of migration, blaming government at all levels for failing to protect the rights of migrants from Central America and Mexico, and at times even colluding to violate their rights. "Migrants are the victims of criminal organizations, in collusion with the authorities," the Archdiocese of Mexico said in a recent editorial in the weekly publication *Desde la Fe*.

Sources said Pope Francis had thought of incorporating Ciudad Juárez to the itinerary for his earlier trip to the region in September, traveling to that border city from Cuba before entering the US via one of the international bridges that connect Ciudad Juárez with El Paso, Texas.

The proposal to include Juárez in the US itinerary had been put forth by Paloma Guillén, former deputy secretary for religious affairs at the Secretaría de Gobernación (SEGOB), during a meeting with Vatican Secretary of State Pietro Parolin in 2014. According to Raymundo Riva Palacio, a columnist for the daily business newspaper *El Financiero*, Pope Francis changed his mind following the news of the massacre of 43 students in Guerrero state in September 2014 ([SourceMex, Oct. 15, 2014](#)).

"The pope asked to travel to the teachers college (Escuela Normal Rural de Ayotzinapa Raúl Isidro Burgos) in Guerrero state to say a Mass with the relatives of the victims," said Riva Palacio, who said the pontiff was turned down.

In explaining why the trip to Juárez was cancelled in September, the pope did not allude to SEGOB's decision to deny a Mass with the relatives of the students in Guerrero. Instead, he was very diplomatic, saying that he could not travel to Mexico without paying homage to the Virgin of Guadalupe in Mexico City.

The trip to Mexico in February also does not include an official trip to Guerrero state. However, the relatives of the victims have asked the Vatican for a meeting with the pope, which is likely to occur at some time during the visit.

The Mexican bishops have complained to the Vatican that the events that led to the massacre of the students in Guerrero are symptomatic of what is occurring elsewhere in the country. "Priests are the victims of extortion on the part of criminal organizations, and the government is not responding or offering any support," Riva Palacio said in his column published in September of this year.

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