

Ireland ready to welcome Pope Francis

They will come by planes, trains and automobiles. All roads lead to Dublin for the Aug. 21-26 World Meeting of Families. The concluding Mass celebrated by Pope Francis before an expected congregation of some 600,000 people will be the pinnacle.

Much has been written about the declining fortunes of the Church in Ireland, especially its long-term recovery from past revelations of sexual abuse by clergy and religious. But the fact that government officials say the Mass will be the second largest event in Irish history says something about the resilience of faith after 1,600 years of Christianity on the island. Perhaps even more remarkably, the only event to draw a bigger crowd was when Pope St. John Paul II celebrated Mass with 1.1 million people in Dublin in 1979.

Family programming

Organizers are keen to point out that the visit of Pope Francis is only the culmination of the six-day event with the theme "The Gospel of the Family: Joy for the World." More than 37,000 people have registered to participate in the events – known as the Pastoral Congress – leading up to the pope's arrival. Almost 40 percent of those registered are coming from overseas, with the United States, Canada, Great Britain, Spain and Italy particularly well represented.

In his letter convoking the World Meeting of Families, the pope asked that the event and its preparation would give families the opportunity to have a way of deepening their reflection and their sharing of the content of his letter *Amoris Laetitia* ("The Joy of Love"), and the Congress is an attempt to be faithful to this mandate. It will offer a daily

program of workshops and discussions, as well as fun and prayerful activities for individuals and families, including a tailored program for children and young people.

According to Brenda Drumm, communications manager for the World Meeting of Families, some 6,000 people under the age of 18 registered to attend. Drumm said that “we can also see that we have a lot of young families.”

The World Meeting of Families began in 1994 when John Paul II asked the Vatican to establish an international event of prayer, catechesis and celebration that would draw participants from around the globe and help to strengthen the bonds between families and bear witness to the crucial importance of marriage and the family to all of society.

Missionary identity

So, why Ireland and why now? According to Cardinal Kevin Farrell, the Dublin-born prelate chosen by Pope Francis to head up the Dicastery for Laity, Family and Life, it is no coincidence that the event is coming to the emerald isle.

He was in Dublin on Aug. 6 to look at final preparations. He says the pope has told him that Ireland’s missionary history inspired him to choose the country for the gathering.

“Do you know that I have read that Ireland sent missionaries – I even had Irish priests in Buenos Aires – all over the world? They Christianized many parts of Africa, some parts of Latin America, certainly North America,” Cardinal Farrell described Pope Francis as saying.

“We need, Pope Francis said, to ensure that they be part of the revolution of promoting once again marriage and family life in our world today,” the cardinal continued, describing how the pontiff said the situation in Northern Europe was drastic and that something needed to be done. “That’s why he chose Ireland to be the center of the next gathering of the

families,” he added.

The cardinal insists that Pope Francis is under no illusions about how family life in Ireland is changing in line with the rest of Europe. It became the first country in the world to legalize same-sex marriage by way of a popular vote in 2015.

“He understands that – he doesn’t think that Ireland is some miracle,” Cardinal Farrell said. “Nobody thinks that, but he thinks there’s a great spirit in the Irish people of giving of themselves to others, and of taking leadership roles, and I think he would hope that Ireland would solve Ireland’s problems first. I think that’s the way that you project a positive message: you resolve your own issues.” Cardinal Farrell added, “I believe he [Pope Francis] realizes, like everybody realizes, the problems that the whole world is facing, and he realizes the problems that you’re faced with.”

Imperfect families

Amidst the challenges for the Church, Father Tim Bartlett, secretary general for the World Meeting of Families 2018, said the interest in the event has been extraordinary. “We could’ve easily doubled the capacity of most of our events,” he said. Father Bartlett noted that the Pastoral Congress is at full capacity and that free tickets for the events with Pope Francis were snapped up extremely quickly.

The event has not been without controversy. Earlier drafts of literature circulated to parishes contained images of a same-sex couple, which were subsequently removed. Some LGBT Catholics have questioned whether the event is open to them, but Primate of All-Ireland Archbishop Eamon Martin has said such concerns are unnecessary.

“At the World Meeting of Families, this is a gathering of people to whom everyone is welcome. I know the families who are going there would be the last to say that they are perfect

in any way," he said. "Even in terms of living up to the teaching of the Church, we all struggle in that. As a bishop I struggle in that. I'm welcome, I hope, at the World Meeting of Families, but so is everyone where they are at in their particular journey of faith."

However, he warned that there would be no watering down of Church teachings that some people find unpalatable.

"It's also a Catholic event, the World Meeting of Families is an event of the Catholic Church. So I don't think we make any apologies for the fact that the Catholic Church has a very clear teaching on marriage and the family," he said.

Pope Francis visits a very different Ireland than that John Paul II toured in 1979. But the challenges facing families remain remarkably similar. According to Father Bartlett, that's what the pope will be reflecting on: the joys and struggles of daily life and the impact strong families have on building strong communities.

Michael Kelly writes from Ireland.