

Pope Francis looks ahead to intense 2019

A couple of years ago, Pope Francis joked that maybe he wouldn't be around in 2019, since octogenarians like himself "are about to pass away."

But as the calendar turns the page and the sixth anniversary of his pontificate approaches, the 82-year-old Argentine pontiff is showing no signs of slowing down.

At an age when most people are comfortably into retirement, the 265th successor of St. Peter is planning on at least four international trips in 2019 that will take him to Latin America, Africa, the Middle East and Asia.

Perhaps aware of his advanced age, Pope Francis appears to be trying to make the most of the time he has left in the chair of St. Peter by addressing the pressing needs of the Church and the world in the 21st century, especially as they relate to the clergy sexual abuse crisis and holding bishops accountable for malfeasance.

Seeking peace

From his Jan. 1 World Day of Peace message about the need for ethical politics during his visits to Panama and the Middle East, Pope Francis will continue to emphasize familiar themes of his pontificate, such as interreligious dialogue, peace, environmental stewardship, concern for poor, indigenous and marginalized communities, and the right of human beings to safely migrate.

"Today more than ever, our societies need 'artisans of peace' who can be messengers and authentic witnesses of God the Father, who wills the good and the happiness of the human family," Pope Francis said in his World Day of Peace message.

“So let this be my greeting at the beginning of the New Year: Peace be to this house!”

In the statement, entitled “Good politics is at the service of peace,” the pope expresses deep concerns about the growing threat to world peace. The world, the pope has said on previous occasions, has been engaged for several years in a “third world war, piecemeal.”

And in an era when a divisive brand of politics seems to be ascendant, from the United States to Latin America to Europe, the pope calls for a new form of political life that can become “an outstanding form of charity.”

“We know that the thirst for power at any price leads to abuses and injustice. Politics is an essential means of building human community and institutions, but when political life is not seen as a form of service to society as a whole, it can become a means of oppression, marginalization and even destruction,” says Pope Francis.

Panama to the Amazon

Three weeks after his World Day of Peace Message, Pope Francis will travel to Panama for the 34th World Youth Day, which will be held in the Central American country Jan. 22-27. The theme of this year’s gathering will be: “I am the servant of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word” (Lk 1:38).

Migration, indigenous people, the environment and the role of women are expected to be major themes during the international gathering, which is expected to draw more than 200,000 participants from 155 countries and five continents.

“I am convinced that Pope Francis will be bringing the theme of hope,” Archbishop José Domingo Ulloa of Panama told journalists during a Dec. 11 press conference in Rome.

Pope Francis is expected to highlight familiar themes when he

returns to the subject of Latin America in October 2019 for the Synod of Bishops for the Amazon region, which will take place in Rome. The synod's theme is entitled "The Amazon: New paths for the Church and for an integral ecology."

"We have to break with the historical paradigm that views Amazonia as an inexhaustible source of supplies for other countries without concern for its inhabitants," Pope Francis said when meeting with indigenous people in Peru in January 2018.

The synod on the Amazon is expected to seek out the voices of people living in that region and identify new paths for evangelization, especially for indigenous people, whom the pope has said "are often forgotten and left without the prospect of a peaceful future, including because of the crisis of the Amazon forest."

Other travels

As of mid-December, the pope's travel schedule for 2019 was not yet complete, but it was already shaping up to be another busy travel year.

On Feb. 3, Pope Francis will arrive in the United Arab Emirates for a three-day visit that will include a private meeting with the Muslim Council of Elders at the Grand Mosque in Abu Dhabi, and a papal Mass at Zayed Sports City. It will be the first visit of any pope to the Arabian peninsula.

The following month, he will travel to Morocco for a two-day visit, March 30-31. He will be the second pope to visit the Muslim-majority country; Pope St. John Paul II visited Morocco in 1985. Pope Francis' trip is expected to focus on Christian-Muslim relations and migration.

In another confirmed trip in 2019, Pope Francis will visit Bulgaria and the Republic of Macedonia from May 5-7. He is expected to visit the Macedonian capital of Skopje, which is

where St. Teresa of Calcutta was born in 1910. The theme for the visit will be "Peace on Earth."

In addition to these announced travels, the pope also reportedly is considering traveling to Madagascar, Uganda, Mozambique and Japan within the 2019 calendar year.

Abuse crisis next steps

In what could be the most challenging and defining moment of his papacy, Pope Francis will meet with the presidents of bishops' conferences from around the world for a Feb. 21-24 summit in Rome to discuss the clerical sexual abuse crisis in the Church.

The pope convened the summit amid a series of revelations against high-ranking churchmen around the world, including U.S. Archbishop Theodore E. McCarrick, retired archbishop of Washington, D.C., who resigned from the College of Cardinals last summer following allegations that he had sexually abused seminarians and minors for decades.

The summit also was announced shortly after Archbishop Carlo Maria Viganò, former nuncio to the United States, in August published a blistering statement where he accused Pope Francis of ignoring concerns about McCarrick.

The February summit could be an opportunity for the pope to send a clear message that abuse is a problem throughout the universal Church that requires the participation of all Church leaders, from bishops to parish lay staff, to resolve.

In November, the Vatican invoked the summit when it sent instructions to the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, at the start of its annual fall assembly, to delay adopting new accountability measures for bishops. Those instructions angered frustrated critics, who are skeptical that the Vatican understands the severity and urgency of the U.S.-based scandals.

In a letter sent Dec. 18 to the heads of bishops' conferences, the summit's organizing committee urged attendees, ahead of the February summit, "to reach out and visit with victims of clergy sex abuse in your respective countries prior to the meeting in Rome, to learn first-hand the suffering that they have endured."

The committee members wrote that Pope Francis "is convinced that through collegial cooperation, the challenges facing the Church can be met."

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The Pope in 2019

Major events and travels of Pope Francis in the New Year are currently anticipated to include:

- **World Youth Day, Panama City, Jan. 22-27:** This gathering will be the third of Pope Francis' pontificate, following Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in 2013, and Krakow, Poland, in 2016. It will also be Pope Francis' seventh visit to his home of Latin America since his 2013 election.
- **Visit to United Arab Emirates, Feb. 3-5:** Stops on this first visit by a pope to the Arabian peninsula will include the Grand Mosque in Abu Dhabi and a papal Mass at a stadium.
- **Abuse summit, Rome, Feb. 21-24:** This first-of-its-kind meeting dedicated to bringing bishops from around the world together to address the issue of clergy sexual abuse is viewed as needing to be a moment for decisive, unified action by the Church. In inviting the presidents of the world's episcopal conferences to participate, it also marks an exercise in more synodal (or collaborative) decision-making and governance of the Church. Among the summit's planners is U.S. Cardinal Blase J. Cupich of Chicago.
- **Visit to Morocco, March 30-31:** Pope Francis is the second pope to visit this Muslim-majority nation.
- **Visit to Bulgaria and Macedonia, May 5-7:** Each of these Balkan nations has a Catholic population that is 1 percent or less of the country and well under 40,000 people. Pope Francis has visited other countries where Catholics comprise a slim minority, such as in Estonia and Sweden, in his prior travels.
- **Special Assembly for the Amazon of the Synod of Bishops, October:** The fourth gathering of the Synod of Bishops of Pope Francis' pontificate, this assembly will look at pastoral and evangelical concerns in the Amazon region. This is expected to include the impacts of globalization and climate change on indigenous people, as well as the pastoral realities of ministering to people in very remote regions.