

What to expect from Pope Francis' journey to Thailand, Japan

Pope Francis' apostolic journey from Nov. 19-26 will take him to Thailand and Japan, making him the first pope to travel to those two Asian countries since St. John Paul II visited nearly 40 years ago.

The pope will emphasize familiar themes in his pontificate during his time in Asia, such as reaching out to those on the margins, caring for creation and the importance of interreligious dialogue in countries where Christians comprise less than 1 percent of the population.

"I think he wants to support the Catholics and other Christians in those countries, to encourage them not to so much into the proselytization of others, but to really witness to the values of Christianity," said Jesuit Father Thomas P. Rausch, a theology emeritus professor from Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles.

Noting that Christians today still face great hostility in parts of Asia, Father Rausch told Our Sunday Visitor that Pope Francis' response is to encourage inter-religious dialogue while bringing the Good News of the Gospel to that region.

"It's a way of strengthening and supporting the Churches in these countries, but also it's a very different way of being present, not in terms of proselytization, but in witnessing to the Gospel. That's what it means to be a missionary disciple," Father Rausch said.

Jesuit Father James Bretzke, a theology professor at John Carroll University in Ohio, told OSV that Pope Francis will be looking to build on the groundwork that St. John Paul II set

when he visited Japan and Thailand in the early 1980s.

“He’s intentionally seeking out places that are on the margins of the Church whenever he can,” Father Bretzke said, adding that the upcoming papal visit will likely not be a watershed moment that leads to “a huge upsurge” in vocations or conversions in either Japan or Thailand.

“I think what the pope is trying to do is to model a mode of engagement that would be more in line with classic interreligious dialogue where you engage each dialogue partner on their own terms and try to find areas of collaboration without the implied (goal) to convert them to Catholicism,” Father Bretzke said.

Christian discipleship

The Holy See Press Office announced that Pope Francis will visit the Kingdom of Thailand from Nov. 20-23 before traveling to Japan from Nov. 23-26, where he will visit Tokyo, Nagasaki and Hiroshima.

The visit to Thailand – which has as its motto “Disciples of Christ, Missionary Disciples” – coincides with the 350th anniversary of the establishment of the Apostolic Vicariate of Siam.

Since the Dominicans first arrived there in 1567 – they were followed by the Franciscans, the Jesuits and the Paris Foreign Missions Society – the Catholic community in Thailand has grown to about 388,000 in a predominantly Buddhist nation of 69 million people.

“Thailand is a very strongly Buddhist country,” Father Bretzke said. “That culturally is not likely to change in the near future.”

Robert Gimello, a research professor emeritus in theology from the University of Notre Dame, who is an expert in Buddhism,

noted that Pope Francis previously visited two other predominantly Buddhist countries – Sri Lanka and Burma – in 2015 and 2017.

“On both occasions he met briefly with prominent Buddhist monks. So far as I can tell, they discussed only matters of generic or universal moral concern,” said Gimello, who added that those matters included caring for the Earth, the need for mutual respect among religions and the importance of overcoming sectarian and political conflict.

“Matters concerning the particular nature of Buddhism, the particular character of actual or desired Catholic-Buddhist relations, seem not to have been addressed, and, unlike [Pope Benedict XVI], Francis has, so far as I know, never said anything specific about the beliefs, values and practices that are distinctive of Buddhism,” Gimello said.

While in Thailand, Pope Francis is expected to visit King Maha Vajiralongkorn and celebrate Mass. The Associated Press reported the pope will also meet his second cousin, Salesian Sister Ana Rosa Sivori, who is a vice principal of a girls' school 355 miles northeast of Bangkok.

On May 18, Pope Francis wrote a message to the Church in Thailand when it marked its 350th anniversary: “I pray that you may grow in holiness and continue to work in the spread of Christ’s kingdom by fostering solidarity, fraternity and the desire for goodness, truth and justice in your beloved country.”

Protecting life

The theme for the pontiff’s visit to Japan is “Protect All Life,” which focuses on caring for human life and the environment. Japan, where Buddhism and Shintoism are the predominant religions, has slightly more than 500,000 Catholics – less than 1% in a nation of 127 million people.

Pope Francis will likely meet with Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and Emperor Naruhito. He also is also expected to follow in the footsteps of his papal predecessor, visiting Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and honoring the Japanese martyrs.

Portuguese Jesuit missionaries brought Catholicism to Japan. In 1620, the faith was outlawed, and a period of bloody persecution followed where scores of Christians were martyred. For over 250 years, Japanese Catholics went underground and kept the faith alive at great personal risk.

Gimello said he hopes Pope Francis will speak about the early history of the Church in Japan, “specifically about the martyrdom of scores of Catholic missionaries and untold numbers of Japanese converts, who gave their lives, not in the cause of encouraging interreligious dialogue, world peace, care of the earth, etc., but for the paramount purpose of advancing and preserving devotion to Christ, his teachings and his Church.”

Last year, Pope Francis – who as a young man dreamed of becoming a missionary in Japan – had the Vatican print thousands of picture cards depicting a young child who survived the Nagasaki bombing. The child carried his dead brother on his back. The card was printed with the words, “The fruit of war.”

When he visits Japan, the pontiff will also speak to the “pile of problems related to life and peace” that a Vatican statement noted are facing the country, including natural catastrophes and nuclear plant accidents that “remain as persisting problems.”

“I think Francis is trying to build on the foundation of JPPII and move things in a somewhat different direction,” Father Bretzke said. “Whereas JPPII tried to focus more in direct evangelization, I think [Pope Francis] moving forward will spend more time emphasizing ecology and globalization, and the

impacts those huge forces have on the poor and marginalized.”

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Evangelization struggles in Japan

“In Japanese society, it is difficult to find tangible success in missionary activities,” said Archbishop Isao Kikuchi of Tokyo in an interview with Catholic News Agency prior to the pope’s visit to Japan.

While the country has a long history of missionary activity through Catholic schools, that tradition is faltering with the overwhelming secularization of education. However, Archbishop Kikuchi pointed to two ways the Church can grow and evangelize.

First, the Japanese Church has evangelized through their presence in disaster relief efforts. “Certainly, these activities may not lead immediately to the reception of baptism,” said Archbishop Kikuchi, “but there is hope that many people who were touched by the spirit of the Gospel would actually be led to the Church.”

Second, immigrants seem to be the future of evangelization in Japan. Filipinos – who are 86% Catholic – are the fourth largest immigrant population, with 250,000 Filipinos living and working in Japan. “Therefore, an important task that must be given priority is to encourage foreign nationals who have settled in Japan to become aware of their missionary vocation as Catholics,” said the archbishop.