News



Bicyclists pass the Bogotá cathedral, which is surrounded by scaffolding Aug. 3 in preparation for Pope Francis' Sept. 6-11 visit to Colombia. (CNS/EPA/Mauricio Duena Castaneda)



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When Pope Francis lands in Colombia in September, he will encounter a population that is still torn over a peace deal ending a bloody 50-year war between the government and rebel guerilla forces.

Experts and local Catholic leaders say the Sept. 6-11 visit will be a new test for Francis, who has stressed God's mercy strongly in his papacy. While the pope has supported the peace deal, half of Colombian society has not, arguing that more justice is needed for the victims of the conflict before it can come to a merciful end.

"It will be a big challenge for the pope to be in Colombia because Colombia is a country that is divided," said Atlanta Auxiliary Bishop Luis Zarama. Zarama, set to be installed as bishop of Raleigh, North Carolina, on Aug. 29, emigrated to the U.S. from Colombia in the 1990s.

He described as near-total the split in his home country over a deal ending a war that has claimed an estimated 220,000 lives and displaced millions. Colombian society, he said, is basically rent in half.

On one side of the divide are those who think President Juan Santos has negotiated a fair peace. On the other are those who think Santos traded away the possibility of justice for the victims in order to end the fighting.

"Colombia is divided and how the pope will be able to make peace with both parts of the country — that will be a big challenge," Zarama said in an NCR interview.

Other Colombian Catholics and experts on the country outlined the task facing Francis in his upcoming trip in similar ways. They described a scenario in which the pope — who has praised the peace deal to reporters repeatedly over the past year and a half — will be expected to balance backing the deal with expressing understanding for those who find fault with it.

They also expressed a fear that Santos could use Francis to provide political backing for the deal as Colombia prepares for congressional and presidential elections next spring.

"A big group of people in Colombia [are] very concerned about why the pope is coming," said Zarama. "Some people think the government will use the pope for its

purpose for the peace process.”

Jesuit Fr. Matthew Carnes, director of Georgetown University’s Center for Latin American Studies, said the relationship between justice and mercy may prove to be one of the key points Francis discusses in speeches during his trip to Colombia, where he will visit four cities across the country in as many days.

“Thinking about things he has preached through his papacy, this idea of mercy could be a key factor,” said Carnes, adding that those who have opposed the peace deal have argued it does not provide enough justice to victims of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and other militant groups.

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Views of justice

“I think Pope Francis [is] going to give credibility to the process, try to inspire a sense of trust, and then really try to help people think through … this idea of justice with mercy,” said Carnes, who is also an associate professor of government at Georgetown.

The Colombian government and the militants had been fighting since the 1960s. Negotiators came to agreement on a peace deal in August 2016. A referendum to ratify the deal in October 2016 was narrowly defeated after 50.2 percent of voters voted against it.

The government and FARC then signed a revised deal in November 2016 that was sent to the Colombian Congress for ratification, instead of pursuing a second plebiscite. The Congress approved that deal, effectively ending the conflict, on Nov. 30, 2016.

Zarama said the question of pursuing justice in Colombia is difficult because “each group … sees justice in their own way.”

“For some of them, they can claim that justice was done,” said the bishop. “But for the other part, they say justice has not been done in Colombia.”

“It’s difficult because the memory is still there,” he explained. “Violence is still going on in Colombia. It’s not something that happened 10 years ago and the people are

able to adjust. No, it’s a tough situation. After 50, 60 years of violence you cannot change that in one month or one year.”

Jesuit Fr. Mauricio García Durán, regional director for Jesuit Refugee Service in Colombia, agreed that the relationship between mercy and justice may be prove to be essential in Francis’ visit.

“The point there is to realize that there is some tension between mercy and justice,” said García, who has led Jesuit Refugee Service in his country for three years. “You have to find a way between these two points.”

García, who has a doctorate in peace studies, said he traveled, as part of his doctoral program, to several countries that had successfully ended long-term conflicts.

“Something that really struck me in these experiences is to recognize that in some way you need to balance the elements not only of justice and mercy but also of truth and reparation,” he said. “You need to find what it is possible to do in order to live together.”

“Obviously, the point is not to have everyone in jail … but to have some measure of justice in order that the society can recognize that they were responsible for some of the really awful things during the conflict,” he said.



Pope Francis greets Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos, center, and former President Alvaro Uribe, Dec. 16, 2016, at the Vatican. (CNS/Reuters/L’Osservatore

Romano)

Meeting with Santos

Francis was to land in Colombia's capital of Bogotá from Rome late on Sept. 6. One of his most anticipated moments in the country will come the next day, when he is to meet with Santos and the country's political leaders in the plaza outside the presidential palace, the Casa de Nariño.

While Zarama said he would not venture to suggest what Francis might say to Santos, other experts gave varied opinions.

García said he hopes Francis will encourage the president to push a series of legal changes through Congress to firm up the peace deal, which he said will not be fully complete until the legislature approves those changes.

He called that issue a "critical point" and said the process toward making the changes have been "very slow."

Hosffman Ospino, a native Colombian theologian who is an associate professor at Boston College, said Francis will have to balance congratulating Santos on the peace deal with encouraging him to work on healing the divisions it has brought about.

Ospino pointed to the support that former President Alvaro Uribe, who has strongly opposed the peace deal, has received for a new political party he has started.

Uribe led Colombia from 2002 to 2010 until Santos' election. He is not able to run for president again under the country's constitution, but experts expect about 10-20 percent of voters to select whichever candidate he endorses in 2018. Santos was awarded the 2016 Nobel Peace Prize for his efforts to end the more than 50-year-long war.

"I think that Pope Francis is going to say we don't need another Venezuela, we don't need another country that is totally divided," said Ospino, who emigrated to the U.S. after his undergraduate studies.

> "I hope that the pope can deliver a very positive message of reconciliation that really helps us Colombians from all sides to try to build a sustainable peace in the country."

— Jesuit Fr. Mauricio García Durán

After his meeting with Santos Sept. 7, Francis will also offer a public address to the country's bishops.

García said he hopes Francis will push the bishops "to be really, really committed with building peace and promoting reconciliation." He also said he hopes Francis will encourage the prelates to not place the burden of reconciliation only upon those who experienced death or loss during the half-century of conflict, but on the entire Colombian population.

Ospino said the bishops need to take a leading role in helping the country rebuild itself.

"Right now the Colombian nation is in a process of reconstruction," he said. "Everyone who calls him or herself Catholic … needs to engage in that process of reconstruction. I think that the Catholic Church has a major role to play in that, through education [and] through encouraging the population to participate politically."

The terms of the peace deal call for militants to give up their arms under United Nations supervision in 26 zones in rural areas around the country. The militants are then to receive billions of dollars from the government in aid, be integrated into wider society, and be allowed to form a new political movement.

Following his day in Bogotá Sept. 7, Francis will visit the cities of Villavicencio, Medellín, and Cartagena on Sept. 8, 9 and 10, respectively. He will return to the capital each night.

The day trip expected to carry the most significance is the one to Villavicencio, which is in the southwest part of the country where most of the fighting with the guerilla groups took place.

After celebrating an outdoor Mass Sept. 8, Francis will take part in what is being described as a "great prayer meeting for national reconciliation" and will offer an address to crowds gathered at the Parque las Malocas, an outdoor wilderness area.



A demonstrator with an “I am a victim” hat protests the government’s peace accord with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia in Cartagena, Colombia, Sept. 26, 2016. (CNS/Reuters/John Vizcaino)

Building ‘sustainable peace’

That may be the occasion where the pope will be most expected to offer a comprehensive vision of peace for Colombia, or a way past divisions on the peace process that are deeply personal for those who experienced loss over five decades of violence.

“After years and years of civil war, there’s so much built up resentment, fear, side-taking,” Carnes said.

Whatever the balancing act Francis will have to perform in Colombia, the experts expressed hope about what the pope can achieve in the country.

“I hope that the pope can deliver a very positive message of reconciliation that really helps us Colombians from all sides to try to build a sustainable peace in the country,” said García. “A peace where everyone can have a place, where everyone can make a way of life, can live together without killing the other.”

Zarama said that in every place Francis has visited so far in his papacy he has been able “to awake hope in the people, even when sometimes they think there is no hope.”

The bishop gave as an example the pope’s November 2015 visit to the Central African Republic, which at the time had no stable government after years of civil war.

“Everybody said, ‘Don’t go there, don’t go there,’ “ Zarama said. “He went there and he really made a big difference.”

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