News



Pope Francis greets Hermana Blanca Nubia Lopez as he blesses the cornerstone of Talitha Qum homeless shelter in Cartagena, Colombia, Sept. 10. (CNS/Paul Haring)



by Soli Salgado

View Author Profile
ssalgado@ncronline.org

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

CARTAGENA, COLOMBIA — September 11, 2017

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

Just outside the city's touristy historic center, Cartagena locals line up behind the street railings for as far as the eye can see, anticipating the popemobile. Enthusiastic yet peaceful, many are seated in plastic chairs they brought from home, or standing with their multicolored umbrellas on an overcast yet bright Sunday morning.

Pope Francis ended his Colombian tour in this city Sept. 10, starting his day by blessing the corner stone of the homeless shelter Talitha Qum at St. Francis Square.

"We felt total joy at finding out he was coming to our parish, as well as great sense of responsibility — not just for our community but for all those who feel personally connected to the pope's visit and his message," said Fr. Elkin Acevedo, pastor at St. Francis, which the pope visited, and director of SEPAS Cartagena, the diocese's pastoral office.

The city has the steepest income inequality in the country, second only to Medellín; the 80 percent of people who lives in poverty is a reality that sharply contrasts the flashy, touristy world of a shared city, Acevedo said. His parish ministers to the poor.

"The pope's presence has brought hope and joy to our diocese," he said. "Knowing that he sees our country, our city, our parish, and all our gifts and struggles, has inevitably brought us closer together as a community."

"I hope this visit jump-starts a social transformation of sorts in this country, or that it gives us the impulse to continue changing our communities. Changing our country can't come from the outside; it has to happen within, with our people."

One 43-year-old man who stood along the rails hoping to catch a glimpse of the pope, said the fact that Francis chose to visit "more humble neighborhoods," such as St. Francis, moved him greatly.

"We take notice of that, and I think that's an ideology he's hoping to impart on us, too: to be among the poor."

In such an economically divided city, its residents need to "do more to better Cartagena," said one 25-year-old woman. "We really do need to take in his message of poverty and inequality.

"Yes, we have a beautiful historic center, but the other side of the city lives an entirely different reality. I hope his presence helps us to stop ignoring that reality and helps us work to make Cartagena an equal experience for all."

Advertisement



Pope Francis greets the crowd before celebrates Mass at Contecar terminal in Cartagena, Colombia, Sept. 10. (CNS/Paul Haring)

While Francis came to Cartagena with the message of poverty and human rights at the forefront — made evident in his visit to the church of St. Peter Claver — his greater message of peace and reconciliation to all of Colombia was what especially resonated with the locals who spoke with NCR.

"For us, after hearing his pleas for peace and forgiveness in the other cities in Colombia, he's become like a support for us, on behalf of the Catholic church," said one woman who brought her two young daughters with her. "He's a reflection of our faith."

One man in his 60s, donning a fedora and wearing a translucent rosary as a necklace, said that hearing the pope speak on peace was the most vital message the country could hear. The man was initially asked about poverty and human rights, but veered toward reconciliation, instead.

"More than any other issue, we need to hear his support of bilateral peace in this country, of brotherhood, and he incarnates that."

[Soli Salgado is a staff writer for Global Sisters Report. Her email address is ssalgado@ncronline.org. Follow her on Twitter @soli_salgado.]

This story appears in the **Francis in Colombia** feature series. View the full series.