Vatican



Workers inspect vestments at a garment factory in Santiago, Chile, meant for a Mass with Pope Francis. On Jan. 15, Pope Francis begins a six-day visit to Chile and Peru. (CNS photo/Ivan Alvarado, Reuters)



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Walking and driving around Santiago, Chile, in the days leading up to Pope Francis' arrival, I would have a hard time guessing a papal visit was about to happen in the country's capital.

Francis will be in Santiago Jan. 15-18 (with trips to Temuco and Iquique in between), in an Andean country that's roughly 75 percent Catholic. But other than the banner hanging from the capital's Metropolitan Cathedral, parishes, and Catholic universities — usually with Francis' face and the papal visit logo, "My peace I give you" — there's not much sign that Chile is about to host its first pope since 1987.

Before arriving in Chile, I thought back to the trip I made to Colombia when Francis visited in September. There, the streets were full of vendors dangling their memorabilia in the faces of all those who walked past. Flags with the pope's image lined the streets of Villavicencio, and even tourists tucked away in Cartagena were not immune to the papal merchandise and tangible excitement of Francis' arrival. I ended up buying my fair share of trinkets simply out of overexposure. Every bar or restaurant had the news on, where talk of the pope's arrival was on repeat.

But in Santiago? The most I experienced the effects of a papal visit was on Friday, on my way to the beach. Santiago declared Monday and Tuesday — the days Francis is in town — as holidays, but instead of using that time to stick around to catch a glimpse of the pope mobile or attend the papal audience, the popular choice was to take advantage of the four-day weekend and make a quick getaway to the beach. What should've been a two-hour commute to Valparaíso easily turned into a five-hour drive.

Later that weekend, I attended a barbecue at a relative's home an hour outside Santiago, where she had Chilean friends over for dinner. And their comments jibed with what my driver to the beach had said earlier: that people were actually quite annoyed to have Monday and Tuesday off, missing out on business unnecessarily. (Though the women at the barbecue grew up Catholic, recalling with fondness the papal visit 31 years ago with St. Pope John Paul II, they said they're no longer churchgoers, attributing much of their disillusionment to the church's sex abuse in their country.)

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This is all anecdotal evidence and should be taken as chance sampling. But every quick conversation I had with Chileans in the days leading up to Francis coming to Chile pretty much went the same way. Taxi and Uber drivers all commented on how sleepy the city was for such an important event pending, adding that maybe there will be a turnaround once His Holiness was in the city.

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Of course the pope won't have a problem drawing hundreds of thousands to the streets and his audience on Tuesday, one taxi driver said — but it doesn't feel like a citywide celebration.

A volunteer from a parish in Santiago, who was participating in the papal event in some capacity, told me that the city was intentional about making the event low-key, at the pope's request: the idea was to keep from being wasteful in the production of throwaway materials and papers, and to make it a rather humble affair instead. Though he didn't express whether or not he thought that was originally a good idea, he said it might have backfired by keeping the city slightly unenthused for the papal event.

Everyone I spoke to also made a point to address the cost of the trip, which totaled more than $10 million. While the government said that transparency of costs would be a condition of hosting the pope, and they fulfilled that promise, the revelation was met with widespread disapproval.

Perhaps these sampled encounters are somehow skewed, and the feel and sights of the streets is no measure for the excitement that Catholic Chileans are privately feeling for Francis' imminent arrival. Perhaps comparing Colombia to Chile is unproductive, as one country was eager for Francis' message of peace and reconciliation, while the other is hoping for answers regarding the appointment of a bishop who was previously involved in sex abuse cover-ups.

Only the pope's presence will prove whether or not the quiet days ahead of his arrival are to be awakened with a message of trust and faith.

[Soli Salgado is a staff writer for Global Sisters Report. Follow her on Twitter **@soli_salgado**.]

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