News



Pope Francis attends an ecumenical prayer service at the Lutheran cathedral in Riga, Latvia, Sept. 24. (CNS photo/Paul Haring)



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Catholics should stand with people who are being excluded from society, seeking not to engage in a "tourism of solidarity" but to feel the wounds of those who are hurting, Pope Francis said at a Mass here Sept. 24.

In a homily to tens of thousands gathered at a Marian shrine among pine forests at Europe's northeastern edge, the pontiff said Mary shows Catholics how to "stand near" people who are suffering.

"It demands more than simply passing by or making a quick visit," said the pope. "Those in painful situations should feel us standing firmly at their side and on their side."

"This is the main way that Mary shows herself," said Francis. "She stands near those who suffer, those from whom the world flees, including those who have been put on trial, condemned by all, deported."

"The mother ... stands close by them, steadfast beneath their cross of incomprehension and suffering," he continued.

Francis was speaking on the third of his four-day visit to the three Baltic states of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia. After spending Sept. 22 and 23 in Lithuania, the pope flew Sept. 24 to Latvia, where he visited with political officials in the capital of Riga before traveling to Aglona.

About 60 miles west of Latvia's border with Russia, Aglona is home to the Basilica of the Assumption, a pilgrimage site that houses a venerated icon of Mary.

Each of the Baltic countries, located as a bloc on the Baltic Sea immediately northeast of Poland, was a part of the Soviet Union and is now a member of the European Union. In Latvia, the Soviet regime undertook several mass deportations in attempts to end resistance to their rule.

Francis reflected in his homily on a reading from John's Gospel, in which Mary stands at the foot of the cross as Jesus is crucified. Like Mary, the pontiff said, Catholics are called to "touch the sufferings of others."

"Let us be ever ready to lift up the fallen, raise up the lowly and to help end all those situations of oppression that make people feel crucified themselves," the pope told

the Latvians.

Francis flew to Aglona by helicopter Sept. 24 after spending the morning in Riga, where he met with Latvian President Raimonds Vejonis and took part in an ecumenical prayer at the Lutheran cathedral of St. Mary.

In a speech to Vejonis and about 500 other political leaders at the 14th century Riga Castle, Francis told Latvians to treasure their freedom and to "commit ... to the integral and integrating development of individuals and the community."

"The development of communities is not produced, much less measured, solely by the amount of goods or resources they possess, but rather by their desire to engender life and build for the future," said the pontiff.

During the ecumenical prayer service, which included Lutheran, Catholic and Orthodox Christian representatives, Francis said "these are not easy times" for some Christians who are experiencing exile and martyrdom.

"Their witness makes us realize that the Lord continues to call us, asking us to live the Gospel radically, in joy and gratitude," said the pontiff.

"If Christ deemed us worthy to live in these times, at this hour — the only hour we have — we cannot let ourselves be overcome by fear, nor allow this time to pass without living it fully with joyful fidelity," the pope said.

"The Lord will give us the strength to make every age, every moment, every situation, an opportunity for communion and reconciliation with the Father and with our brothers and sisters, especially those nowadays considered inferior, worthy of being discarded," said Francis.

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"If Christ considered us worthy to ensure that the melody of the Gospel be heard, can we fail to do so?" he asked.

Crowds in Aglona waited for hours in off-and-on pouring rain for their chance to celebrate Mass with Francis. Many were wearing brightly colored ponchos; some were sitting in camp chairs as the open lawn in front of the basilica became muddy from foot traffic.

Francis is to return from Latvia to Lithuania for the night Sept. 24. He will travel to Estonia Sept. 25 before heading back to Rome that evening.

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