News



People attend the christening ceremony of the new bells of the Cathedral Basilica of St. Mary Nov. 24 in Panama City. Archbishop Jose Domingo Ulloa Mendieta of Panama spoke during the ceremony for the new eight bells and the opening of the renovated cathedral, where Pope Francis will celebrate Mass in January during World Youth Day. (CNS/EPA/Bienvenido Velasco)



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Pope Francis began 2018 with a trip to a Latin American country where the focus was on his response to clergy sexual abuse. It appears 2019 will start in a similar way.

Two abuse survivors are asking the pontiff to meet with them during his January trip to Panama, hoping to press the pope on his appointment of an archbishop in neighboring Costa Rica who they say covered up for their abuser.

Maikol Rodríguez Solera and Anthony Venegas Abarca say that, as a church official in the early 2000s, now-Archbishop José Rafael Quirós Quirós failed to heed their reports about Fr. Mauricio Víquez Lizano, who was only removed from ministry this year.

Revelation of the request for a papal meeting over abuse in Costa Rica comes as Latin America experts have wondered how Francis' traditional focus during trips to the region on issues such as economic inequality could be affected by the ongoing abuse crisis.

In email interviews with NCR, Rodríguez and Venegas said they are seeking time with Francis to explain the pain of their experience waiting for their abuser to be held to account.

Francis appointed Quirós as archbishop of San Jose, Costa Rica's capital, in July 2013.

"I would love for him [Pope Francis] to want to meet with us so we can personally tell him what we have lived," said Rodríguez, who said that he and Venegas made their request for a meeting through Juan Carlos Cruz, one of three Chilean abuse survivors who met Francis earlier this year.

"We hope that Pope Francis, acting with zero tolerance ... [will] apply the corresponding canonical sanctions," Rodríguez said about Quirós. "We have asked Pope Francis to have a meeting on his trip to Panama in January to personally show him evidence of these crimes."

Venegas said he first reported his abuse by Víquez to Quirós in 2003, when the future archbishop was serving as the vicar general of the San Jose archdiocese. The survivor said Quirós kept the priest in ministry and continued to appoint him to official roles even after becoming archbishop 10 years later.

The archdiocese of San Jose has not responded to requests for comment about Rodríguez and Venegas' claims.

Francis will be visiting Panama Jan. 23-27, primarily for the triennial celebration of World Youth Day.

Although Quirós is not a Panamanian bishop, the World Youth Day events are likely to draw in bishops from across the region, and the Costa Rican is expected to take part in a meeting Francis will have with prelates from across Central America on Jan. 24.

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The Panama trip will be Francis' first return to Latin America, his native region, since his January 2018 visit to Chile and Peru.

The pontiff was harshly criticized in Chile for his appointment of a bishop Cruz and other victims said had protected a notorious abuser priest. During the visit, the pontiff enraged survivors by calling the accusations against the bishop "calumny."

The pope, however, made a sharp turnabout after the visit abroad, admitting he made "serious mistakes" in his handling of sexual abuse cases in Chile. Each of the country's bishops later submitted their resignations to Francis, and the pontiff has so far accepted seven of them, including that of the bishop he defended during his visit.

Cruz, who met with Francis at the Vatican in May, said in an NCR phone interview that he hopes the pontiff's visit to Panama will show that the pope has a "new vision" for how to deal with clergy abuse.

"I'm hoping that he has a new view and a new compassion for survivors, and for the evils of so many bishops in Latin America that make it a habit of covering up," said the abuse survivor.

Following its practice for previous papal visits, the Vatican has not announced whether Francis plans to meet with survivors in Panama.

Although Cruz said he did not want to speak on the record about Rodríguez and Venegas' request for a meeting with the pope, the Chilean said he has encouraged the pontiff to meet frequently with survivors.

Cruz said that when he met with Francis in May, he told the pope: "I cannot be the exception. I have to be the norm."

"Obviously, not every survivor is going to get to meet the pope," said Cruz. "But I think it's a good opportunity when he travels to different places where these things have happened … for him to meet with survivors and talk to them."

"I've encouraged him, when I've talked to him, to do that," Cruz continued. "Precisely because I would hate to feel the exception and not the norm, in terms of being heard, respected and believed."

'Region of great complexities'

Francis' schedule in Panama follows a familiar format. His first official engagement will come in the morning of Jan. 24, when he is to meet with President Juan Carlos Varela and the country's other political leaders. The meeting with the Central American bishops comes later the same day.

On Jan. 25, Francis will visit a juvenile detention center. On Jan. 26, he will celebrate a Mass for priests and religious at Panama City's Cathedral Basilica of St. Mary.

The papal trip will conclude Jan. 27 with Francis leading the closing Mass for World Youth Day in a public square named for his predecessor John Paul II.

Latin America experts said they would be watching during the trip how Francis balances addressing both regional concerns and international scrutiny over clergy sexual abuse.

Jesuit Fr. Matthew Carnes, director of Georgetown University's Center for Latin American Studies, noted that while Panama City has become a financial hub in the region, other parts of the country are still underdeveloped.

"It will be really interesting to see how [the pope] will talk about that in this larger moment and context of real crisis in the church, and how he'll try to address both those very different concerns," said Carnes.

Drawing comparisons among Francis' trips to Latin America, the Jesuit compared the pontiff's visit to Chile and Peru in 2018 with his visit to Bolivia, Ecuador and Paraguay in 2015.

Though focus during the Chile trip was on sexual abuse, focus during the 2015 visit was drawn more to the pontiff's criticism of a global economic system that, he said, "excludes, debases and kills."

"In some ways, it's these two poles of what Pope Francis has on the one hand chosen to deal with and on the other hand has in some ways fallen into his lap to have to deal with," said Carnes.

Mario Paredes, who has advised both the Vatican and the U.S. bishops on Latin American issues for decades, noted the various conflicts across Central America that Francis might address while in Panama.

Mentioning continuing protests against Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega, gang violence in El Salvador, and the ongoing economic and political crisis in Honduras, Paredes said Francis is returning to "a region of great complexities."

"It is of great hope to have the Holy Father in that region," said Paredes, now chief executive of Somos Community Care, a physician-led network of healthcare providers in New York. "Definitely, it's a region that needs a voice of authority in the midst of so much corruption."

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