Vatican
News



Pope Francis meets President Filipe Nyusi of Mozambique during a private audience Sept. 14, 2018, at the Vatican. (CNS/Alberto Pizzoli, pool via Reuters)



by Joshua J. McElwee

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

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

Vatican City — August 5, 2019

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

Pope Francis is preparing to make only his second visit to sub-Saharan Africa next month, and it appears that it could be one of the most politically delicate among his previous 30 trips abroad.

During the Sept. 4-10 voyage the pope will visit Mozambique, where a peace accord with a militant guerilla movement appears tenuous; Madagascar, returning to constitutional government after a 2009 coup, and Mauritius, where the president resigned last year under a cloud of financial scandal.

Outside observers and Catholics in the three nations are hoping the pontiff can help ease tensions in each place, and perhaps give impetus to movements for reconciliation and political unity.

Jesuit Fr. Agbonkhianmeghe Orobator, the president of his order's Conference of Africa and Madagascar, called the situation in each country "quite challenging."



Jesuit Fr. Agbonkhianmeghe Orobator seen participating at a conference at Hekima University College in 2015. (NCR/Joshua J. McElwee)

"My hope is that when Francis visits his presence will be a source of encouragement and inspiration for the people in their struggle for a better life," said Orobator, a Nigerian who is based in Kenya. "The pope brings much needed graces of hope, renewal and compassion. I believe he will put fresh hearts into a people facing so

many challenges."

Bishop António Ferreira Sandramo, an auxiliary in the Mozambican capital of Maputo, said he is counting on Francis to encourage his compatriots "not to see who is different from you — or to think of enemies, or of people you have to put aside — but to move together on the road of constructing the ways of goodness for everyone in this country."

"I think all the country will be watching that," said Ferreira, who is helping organize the national effort for the visit to Mozambique.

As usual, Francis' itinerary in each of the three countries focuses more on spiritual rather than political matters. But the pontiff will meet the leaders of each nation, and offer a public address to them that will be closely evaluated.

In Mozambique, the pope will address President Filipe Nyusi just five weeks before voters go to the polls, deciding whether to reelect Nyusi or choose one of two main opposition leaders.

One of those opposing Nyusi is Ossufo Momade, whose National Resistance party (Renamo) is a former militant group. Although the government signed a peace accord with the group August 1, the European Union has expressed concern in the past that the election, if not conducted properly, could undermine efforts for lasting peace.

In Madagascar, Francis will speak with President Andry Rajoelina, who first came to power in 2009 after military-backed protests ousted elected leader Marc Ravalomanana. Rajoelina later won his country's 2018 election with about 55 percent of the vote.



The logo for Pope Francis' trip to Madagascar (CNS/Vatican Press Office)

And in Mauritius, the pope will meet acting President Barlen Vyapoory, who took over after Ameenah Gurib-Fakim, the country's first female president, was accused of credit card fraud.

Ferreira said he hoped Francis would encourage political leaders in Mozambique to work for an official peace accord.

"I hope Pope Francis will encourage this process, will give a word of encouragement in this process, not to go backward but to reach real peace," said the bishop. "Because if there's no peace, it is very difficult to reach a level of development and help lift the country out of poverty."

A provincial representative for the Community of Sant'Egidio in Mozambique likewise expressed hope that the pope would encourage reconciliation between the parties.



The logo for Pope Francis' trip to Mozambique (CNS/Vatican Press Office)

"There are elements that have to be put on the table between the government of Mozambique and the opposition party … about the guns, about demilitarization and the de-arming process," said Nelson Moda, who is also a high-school teacher.

"I think the pope will not leave this point alone," he said.

"People want peace and we are now going to general elections in October," said Moda. "And most of our conflict in the last years are post-electoral conflicts. A lot has to be done in terms of reconciliation, and a peace agreement has to be reached, so that … there won't be post-election conflict, which will make us again fall into war."

Jesuit Fr. Fulgence Ratsimbazafy, the provincial for his order in Madagascar, said that if he could make one request to Francis about what to speak about with his

country's political leaders, it would be to encourage them to work together.

Ratsimbazafy pointed to the Malagasy word "*fihavanana*," which he said stresses building a culture of unity, solidarity and teamwork.

"The pope, as a man of the good news, that's part of the theme of his visit: peace and hope," said the Jesuit. "If he speaks about that to the president, that would be very important."

Visits to AIDS clinic, Mauritian shrine

Francis' only other trip to sub-Saharan Africa came in November 2015, when he visited Kenya, Uganda and the Central African Republic. The visit to the last country was particularly precarious, as it came in the midst of a political transition after horrific fighting between separate Muslim and Christian militias.

In a forceful homily during his trip to the country, which was marked by the presence of armored U.N. tanks lining the routes to his events, the pope exhorted those who had taken up weapons to "lay down these instruments of death!"

Francis will be visiting Mozambique, which is to the northeast of South Africa on the southern tip of the African continent, from Sept. 4-5. He then heads to Madagascar, the world's fourth-largest island, some 750 miles east in the Indian Ocean, through Sept. 10.

On Sept. 9, the pontiff will take a two-hour flight further east for a day-trip to Mauritius, a smaller island about the size of the state of Rhode Island, before coming back to Madagascar for the evening ahead of a flight home to Rome in the morning of Sept. 10.



The logo for Pope Francis' trip to Mauritius (CNS/Vatican Press Office)

The pope's schedule in each of the countries follows a familiar format: After addressing each of the countries' political leaders, he will host meetings with priests, religious and bishops, and take part in interreligious gatherings.

But the itineraries in each country also have their own unique moments.

In Mozambique, for example, Francis will visit a clinic run by the Community of Sant'Egidio that primarily serves low-income HIV/AIDS patients. In Mauritius, the pontiff will pray at a shrine dedicated to Blessed Jacques-Désiré Laval, a 19th century French Spiritan priest and missionary who devoted his life to caring for the slaves in what was then a British colony.

Francis will be at Laval's shrine on the 155th anniversary of the priest's death on Sept. 9, 1864, which is commemorated each year with a walking pilgrimage by Catholics across the island.

Fr. Jean Claude Veder, the director of a diocesan training institute in Mauritius, called the timing "a great gift of God." Although the visit is being described as private, Veder said he expects a "great many" people who have undertaken the traditional pilgrimage to be outside the shrine, hoping to pray along with and see the pope.

Among those hoping to be there is Lorenza Camangue, a 21-year-old woman from Bois d'Oiseaux, a small village on the other side of the island from the shrine's

location in the capital of Port Louis. Camangue said she had recently looked at the photos of John Paul II's visit to the shrine in October 1989.

"It won't be the same, but it's like I will be living it for real now," she said. "It's not only in pictures. It's even more special that he is coming on that particular day."

Moda, the Sant'Egidio representative, said the visit to the clinic in Mozambique would have tremendous meaning, as it is the only occasion during Francis' time in the country that he will directly encounter the poor.

Moda said the clinic, called a "Dream Center," is the only private healthcare facility in Mozambique that provides free care, and is the biggest operated by Sant'Egidio in the country.

"Visiting the 'Dream Center,' Pope Francis is visiting the poor," said Moda, who is from Beira, over 400 miles north of the capital of Maputo. "I think it has got a great significance … to show the charism of Pope Francis."

"Visiting our center not only makes the members of the Community of Sant'Egidio joyful, but also gives an opportunity to those people who could never think of seeing or greeting the pope personally," he said. "It is also a way of letting the pope get closer to people in need, to people with wounds or suffering in their lives."

Something that is not on Francis' published agenda but seems likely to occur is a visit with Jesuits. The pope has frequently spent time with members of his religious order during his trips abroad, with the Vatican usually only confirming the encounters afterward.

Ratsimbazafy, the Jesuit provincial, said he still was not sure if there would be such a meeting. He joked that he had told his some 270 confreres in the country to "be ready at any time," in case the pope asks for an encounter at the last minute.

Ratsimbazafy said he would like to express gratitude to Francis for approving in February the Jesuits' new universal apostolic preferences, four overarching values that are to guide the work of the global order for the next decade.

"We are very grateful to him," said the provincial.



A woman carries a child March 17 in the aftermath of Cyclone Idai in Beira, Mozambique. (CNS/Josh Estey, Care International via Reuters)

Overcoming 'dark moments'

Each of the three countries Francis is visiting are religiously diverse.

In Mozambique, the population is split mainly between Christians and Muslims. According to the latest census, held in 2007, the population of nearly 30 million is about 56 percent Christian and about 18 percent Muslim. Among the Christians, about half are Catholic.

In Madagascar, the Pew Research Center estimates that the population of some 26 million is about 85 percent Christian, split about equally between Protestants and Catholics.

Hinduism is the dominant religion in Mauritius, with a 2011 census estimating that about 49 percent of the 1.3 million population identified as Hindu. About 26 percent identified as Catholic, and 17 percent as Muslim.

Moda said one challenge for the Catholic Church in Mozambique is loss of Catholics to evangelical and Pentecostal churches. He said he hoped Francis would address the issue when he speaks to the country's bishops Sept. 5.

"This has to be faced with the reality and with practical action in looking on what is missing: where are we failing to satisfy the need of the people in the church?" said the Sant'Egidio leader.

Ferreira, the auxiliary bishop, said it is difficult to minister in Mozambique due to a lack of priestly vocations, and that the church there still relies on help from European and South American missionaries. He also highlighted a need for the church to inculturate itself better.

"Inculturation is a big challenge," he said. "There was a style in the former times: colonial religious education was also education in European culture. Now, the big challenge is how to make this church to be authentic in its way of praying."

"To follow Jesus as Africans," said the bishop. "That is the challenge."

Advertisement

Francis is also coming to Mozambique months after the country suffered one of its worst natural disasters with the dual landfall of Cyclone Idai in March, which killed more than 1,200 people, helped kickoff a devastating cholera outbreak, and caused some $2 billion in damage.

Moda, who is from Beira, a coastal town in central Mozambique where the worst damage occurred, said people there had hoped Francis might make a special stop to see them. But he said he understood why the pope is only going to Maputo, the capital.

"Even if the official program does not expect the pope to come to Beira, I can see the enthusiasm of the people … to go and see the pope in Maputo," he said.

"This makes me understand that the pope has got that dimension that breaks through our nationalism, our ethnicism," said Moda. "Visiting Maputo is visiting Mozambique as a country."

"People are expecting to hear words that will help the overcome the dark moments that we are passing here in Mozambique," he said.

[Joshua J. McElwee is NCR Vatican correspondent. His email address is jmcelwee@ncronline.org. Follow him on Twitter: @joshjmac.]

This story appears in the **Francis in Africa 2019** feature series. View the full series.