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Pope Francis shakes hands with Madagascan President Andry Rajoelina during a meeting with government authorities, leaders of civil society and the diplomatic corps in the Ceremony Building in Antananarivo, Madagascar, Sept. 7, 2019. (CNS photo/Paul Haring)



by Joshua J. McElwee

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ANTANANARIVO, MADAGASCAR — September 7, 2019
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Pope Francis encouraged Madagascar's political leaders Sept. 7 to do more to protect the island's unique ecosystem, which is threatened by historic levels of deforestation and resource mining, as they seek to develop one of the world's poorest economies.

In his first remarks during a three-day visit to the country, the pontiff said the continued loss of biodiversity in Madagascar, where some 90 percent of the native animals and plants exist nowhere else on Earth, would threaten not only the local ecosystem but the entire planet.

"Your lovely island of Madagascar is rich in plant and animal biodiversity, yet this treasure is especially threatened by excessive deforestation," the pope told President Andry Rajoelina and other leaders during an address at the presidential palace.

"The deterioration of that biodiversity compromises the future of the country and of the earth, our common home," said Francis. "It is important to create jobs and activities that generate income, while protecting the environment and helping people to emerge from poverty."

Francis is visiting Madagascar, the world's fifth largest island, as part of a three-nation tour of Southern Africa that started in Mozambique and will also include a stop at the smaller island of Mauritius.

The pope, who has made global environmental destruction a central concern of his six-year papacy, is expected to focus on the issue throughout the trip. Madagascar is losing about 245,000 acres of forest each year, according to the U.S. Agency for International Development.

The country's political leaders have been struggling to address the matter while also encouraging job growth in the agricultural and mining sectors to improve the economy in what the World Bank estimates is the 9th poorest nation in the world,

with 75 percent of the population of 23.6 million living on less than $1.90 a day.

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Rajoelina, who at age 45 is one of the world's youngest national leaders, told Francis his people are seeking to turn a new page and that they have "the determination and desire to finally see their country rise up."

Some of the diplomats present for Francis' remarks at the Iavoloha palace expressed appreciation for the pope's environmental focus. "Unless there are measures to prevent mass deforestation and promote mass reforestation then possibly the most unique habitat on earth will be lost," said Philip Boyle, the British ambassador to Madagascar.

Catholic Relief Service's representative in the country told NCR that his organization has also had to deal with the effects of global climate change on the island, which some ecologists say is causing more intense cyclones on the coast and more intense droughts inland.

"We've had in a period of two months, basically almost at the same time, a drought happening and a cyclone hitting the country," said James Hazen, the acting country representative for CRS, which has operated across the island for more than 50 years.

"The challenges around the effects of climate change are very different," Hazen said. "I think people may not always recognize how diverse and different this country can be, and the challenges there are when you've got still limited infrastructure and it's a huge place."

Later Sept. 7, Francis met with Madagascar's bishops, urging them to take a careful approach in their relations with the island's government, which has experienced a protracted period of controversial changes.



Young people sing as Pope Francis arrives at the airport in Antananarivo, Madagascar, Sept. 6, 2019. (CNS photo/Paul Haring)

Rajoelina 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.

"A prudent and independent cooperation between the church and the state remains a constant challenge, for there is always a danger of collusion," the pontiff told the bishops.

"By attentive listening to what the Spirit continues to say … we can escape pitfalls and release the ferment of the Gospel for the sake of a fruitful cooperation with civil society in the pursuit of the common good," said the pope. "The mark of such discernment will be that the proclamation of the Gospel demonstrates concern for all forms of poverty."

Francis is to continue his visit to Madagascar Sept. 8 with the celebration of an outdoor Mass and a visit to a development project on the edge of a garbage dump.

He is to travel Sept. 9 to Mauritius, about 700 miles east, before heading back to Rome Sept. 10.

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