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A woman walks past a mural of Pope Francis on a wall surrounding a church in Baghdad Feb. 22. (CNS/Reuters/Khalid al-Mousily)



by Heidi Schlumpf

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In my first year as NCR's executive editor, there have been a lot of firsts. When Pope Francis travels to Iraq March 5-8, it will be the first coverage of a papal trip I will oversee as editor — but not the first one for our Vatican correspondent, Joshua McElwee. In fact, this will be his 24th trip with Francis as a journalist traveling in the Vatican press pool. (Twenty-seventh, if you count three papal trips where he traveled for NCR on his own!)

To shed some light on the preparations for the Iraq trip, I invited McElwee for a brief Q&A interview:

***Schlumpf*: Josh, this is Pope Francis' first trip since the coronavirus lockdown last spring, and your first chance to travel outside the country, too. How does it feel to go from barely leaving your Rome apartment, to planning to travel to Iraq?**

McElwee: "2020 was the first year of my life that I never left the Italian peninsula. I certainly didn't expect my first visit outside the *bel paese* would be to Iraq! But that might be a bit of the message the pope is sending: that as we start to be able to travel again, we might think less about the fancy vacation we could plan and more about our brothers and sisters in places that are still in need."

As part of being chosen to be part of the press pool to make the trip, you were able to get the coronavirus vaccine. How do you think the pandemic will affect the trip?

"I'm expecting that the trip will be a bit more 'antiseptic' than we're used to with Francis. He won't be able to walk among the crowds. (Or accept cups of mate, as he's been known to do!) The Vatican has alerted the journalists traveling that we will need to wear N95 masks at all times.

"Archbishop Bashar Matti Warda, who leads the Chaldean Catholic community in Irbil, told me organizers are strictly limiting the numbers of people who can come to

events and will be collecting phone numbers in case there is a need to conduct contact tracing later."

How else do you prepare for a papal trip? Anything special you had to do for this one?

"A lot of my preparation is just thinking through the logistics. What electrical plugs will we need in country? How much cash do I need to bring, and what kind? I am also doing interviews to prepare for some of the stories I think I will need to file while on the trip, and a lot of reading to learn as much as I can about Iraq. Unfortunately, there aren't that many travel books about the country!"

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Security is always an issue when the pope travels, but after a double suicide bombing in Baghdad in January and three rocket attacks in the country in late February, it will be heightened for this trip. How do you expect that to affect the pope's ability to meet with people, and your ability to cover events?

"I think we can expect that the security will be very tight. I'm remembering when Francis traveled to Egypt in 2017, and authorities shut down major highways and disabled cellphone service to prevent use of radio-activated explosives. And when the pope went to the Central African Republic in 2015, where white U.N. tanks and pickup trucks mounted with heavy guns accompanied us from the airport in Bangui.

"Nothing will compare, however, with the security for the pope's visit to the U.S., where the federal government essentially emptied out the entire city of Philadelphia. It was a surreal experience — having to walk into the city on foot and not seeing a single non-police car for miles."

Often one of the more newsworthy parts of a papal trip is the freewheeling press conference on the plane ride home. It's been more than a year since reporters have had a chance to ask the pope questions directly. Do you think Francis is ready for all your questions?

"All aspects of a papal trip abroad are important, but this is the part that really excites me. It's the only time we really get to ask the pope questions. Some of my proudest moments as a journalist have come in those press conferences, like in 2017 when I asked Francis about Irish survivor Marie Collins' decision to resign from his commission on clergy abuse.

"There's an Italian word that doesn't translate well into English: *furbo*. It means being cunning or shrewd. As Francis was then, I think we can expect the pope will be prepared to answer questions honestly, if sometimes in *modo furbo*."



Pope Francis responds to a question from Joshua McElwee of the National Catholic Reporter aboard the papal plane from Skopje, North Macedonia, to Rome May 7, 2019. (CNS/Paul Haring)

As usual, to follow the news from the pope's trip to Iraq, be sure to follow McElwee's reporting at **NCRonline.org**. For more up-to-the-minute reports, follow NCR and McElwee on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram.

When we published a recent NCR editorial that called for a Vatican investigation of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops over its leadership's partisan, pro-Trump activity, we didn't expect it would become a petition. But thanks to Faithful America, a progressive Christian group, more than 21,000 folks have signed a petition asking Francis to "order an apostolic visitation to investigate what has gone wrong with the USCCB, institute substantial changes, and direct the bishops to once again speak for all American Catholics in a spirit of cooperation and national audacity."

Signers include more than two dozen current or emeritus University of Notre Dame faculty, and more than 300 Catholic sisters, brothers and priests. The petition was mailed to the apostolic nunciature in Washington, D.C., and the permanent observer mission of the Holy See to the United Nations.

We'll be sure to let you know if that investigation happens.

This story appears in the **Pope Francis in Iraq** feature series. View the full series. A version of this story appeared in the **March 5-18, 2021** print issue under the headline: NCR's McElwee is Iraq-bound.