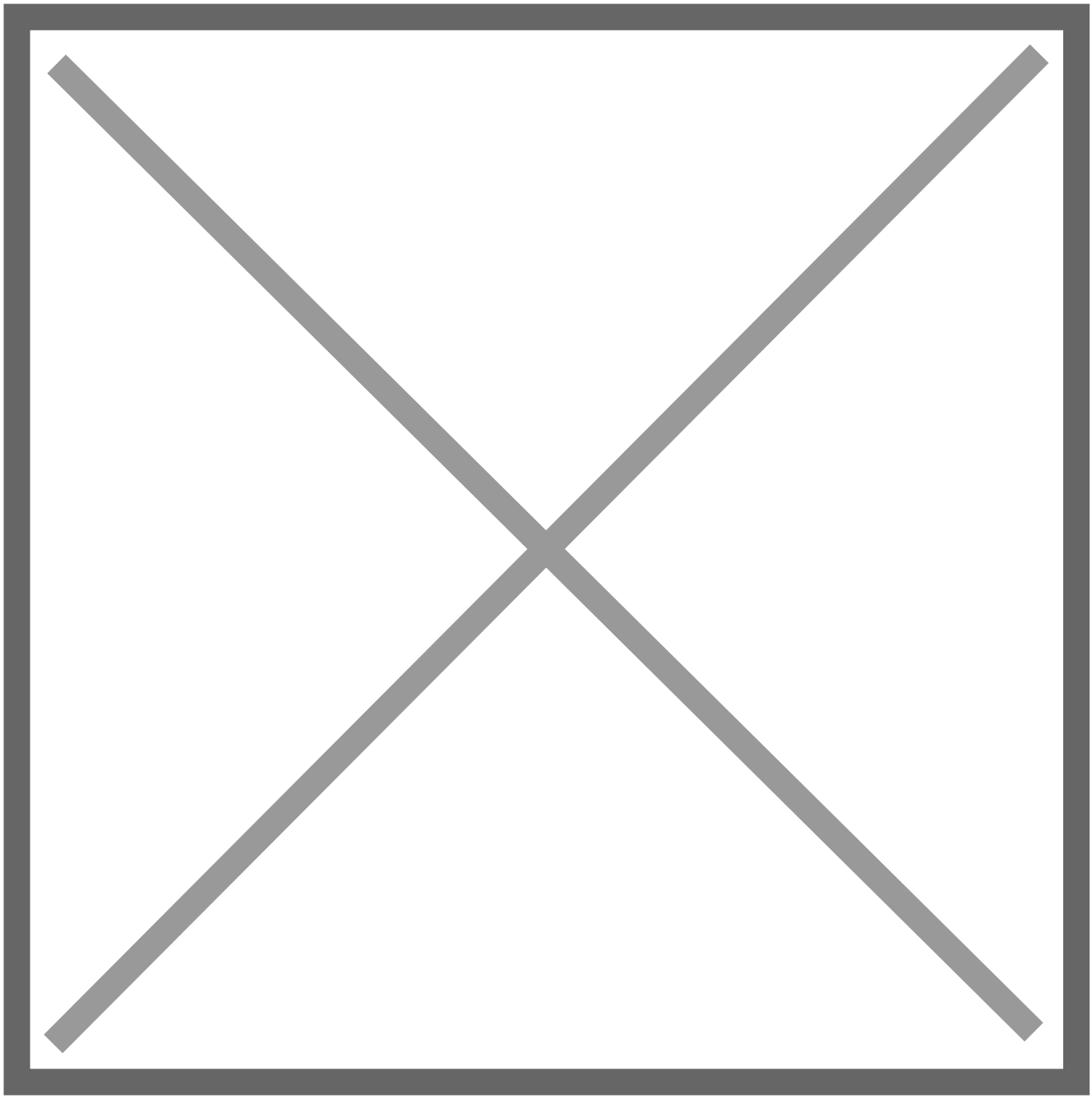
Vatican
News



Pope Francis walks with Slovak President Zuzana Caputová as he arrives at the international airport in Bratislava, Slovakia, Sept. 12, 2021. (CNS photo/Paul Haring)



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BRATISLAVA, SLOVAKIA — September 13, 2021

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Editor's note: *This story has been updated with reporting from Pope Francis' visit to Rybné Square.*

Slovakia's fragile freedom will not be strengthened through isolationism or engaging in culture wars Pope Francis said on Sept. 13, but rather through authentic dialogue and openness.

The pope's remarks came during his first full day in the Slovakian capital, where he spent the morning meeting with the country's president and civil leaders, as well as its Catholic bishops, priests and religious. In back-to-back gatherings, the pope addressed similar themes, drawing on the country's rich Christian heritage to chart a path for the future.

"All of us are frail and in need of others. None can stand apart, either as individuals or as a nation," Francis said during his opening address at the presidential palace.

"Your mountains combine in one range a variety of peaks and landscapes, spilling over national borders in order to join together in beauty different peoples," he said. "Cultivate this beauty, the beauty of the whole."

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The young democracy, where more than 60% of its citizens identify as Catholic, became sovereign in 1993 and entered the European Union and NATO in 2004. Francis encouraged the country to continue being "a message of peace in the heart of Europe" by pursuing just economic structures, generous migration policies and genuine religious freedom.

"It is my hope that you will never allow the rich flavors of your finest traditions to be spoiled by the superficiality of consumerism and material gain," Francis said. He went on to warn against the temptation of the "lure of profit" that "rather than bringing people together, proves only divisive."

"In these lands, until just a few decades ago, a single thought-system stifled freedom," the pope said in reference to the country's communist past. "Today another single thought-system is emptying freedom of meaning, reducing progress to profit and rights only to individual needs."

A just society, Francis said, is one that allows "each person to receive the bread of employment, so that none will feel marginalized or constrained to leave family and homeland in search of a better life."

Just one day after the pope told church and civil leaders in neighboring Hungary, known for its hard-line immigration policies, that the cross of Christ requires being welcoming and hospitable, the pope urged Slovakia to remain open to those in need.

"Even as battles for supremacy are waged on various fronts, may this country reaffirm its message of integration and peace," Francis said. "And may Europe be distinguished by a solidarity that, by transcending borders, can bring it back to the center of history."

"No one should be stigmatized or suffer discrimination," he added. "Our Christian way of looking at others refuses to see them as a burden or a problem, but rather as brothers and sisters to be helped and protected."

Pope Francis speaks as he visits the "Bethlehem Center" in Bratislava, Slovakia, Sept. 13. (CN

Pope Francis speaks as he visits the "Bethlehem Center" in Bratislava, Slovakia, Sept. 13. (CNS/Paul Haring)

While the pope's seven-hour stay in Hungary on Sept. 12 was closely watched for his meeting with its ultranationalist Prime Minister Viktor Orban, Francis is expected to receive a more sympathetic welcome from Slovakian President Zuzana Čaputová during his three-day stay in the country.

Čaputová, who was elected in 2019 on an anti-corruption platform, met with Francis at the Vatican in Dec. 2020 and the two leaders are aligned on a number of signature issues, most notably on immigration and environmental concerns.

Despite the Vatican's disagreement with the Slovak government on certain social issues, including reproductive rights and LGBTQ policies, the pope emphasized the need for collaboration and dialogue rather than strict opposition.

"The salt of the faith acts not by reacting in worldly terms, by engaging in culture wars, but by quietly and humbly sowing the seeds of God’s kingdom, especially by the witness of charity," he said.

The pope reiterated that message when he met with the country's bishops, priests and religious in Bratislava's St. Martin's Cathedral.

"The church is not a fortress, a stronghold, a lofty castle, self-sufficient and looking out upon the world below," he said.

Instead, he told the historically traditionalist Catholic community to adopt a posture of humility and a readiness to engage the world around it, especially its young people and those on the margins.

"How great is the beauty of a humble church, a church that does not stand aloof from the world, viewing life with a detached gaze, but lives her life within the world," he said. "Living within the world means being willing to share and to understand people’s problems, hopes and expectations."

"This will help us to escape from our self-absorption, for the center of the church is not the church!," Francis continued. "We have to leave behind undue concern for ourselves, for our structures, for what society thinks about us."

The pope, who has made the themes of accompaniment and discernment touchstones of his papacy, told the country's religious leaders to "become immersed in the real lives of people."

While acknowledging that such an approach has some risks, and may be uncomfortable for many Catholics, the pope said the church must have room "for the adventure of freedom" that is diverse in its expression.

"Many others — especially the younger generations — are not attracted by a faith that leaves them no interior freedom, by a church in which all are supposed to think alike and blindly obey," he said.

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During his remarks, a lively and engaged pope frequently spoke unscripted, telling the cathedral full of young priests and seminarians to shorten their homilies and not to focus on themes or arguments that few understand.

"Everyone should discover the freedom of the Gospel by gradually entering into a relationship with God, confident that they can bring their history and personal hurts into his presence without fear or pretense, without feeling the need to protect their own image," he continued.

"May the proclamation of the Gospel be liberating, never oppressive," said Francis. "And may the church be a sign of freedom and welcome!"

After a morning of calling Catholics to engage the world around it, the pope put his own words into action, first visiting a center for the homeless and marginalized on the outskirts of the city run by the Missionaries of Charity, followed by a visit to Rybné Square in the former Jewish quarter.

There, the pope paid tribute to the 105,000 Slovak Jews killed during the Holocaust, and as he did the day before in Hungary, Francis again reiterated his condemnation of anti-Semitism.

"Let us unite in condemning all violence and every form of anti-Semitism, and in working to ensure that God’s image, present in the humanity he created, will never

be profaned," he pleaded.

On the very grounds of a former synagogue that was demolished during the communist rule, the pope reminded those present that "darkness is dispelled by the message that destruction and death do not have the last word, but rather renewal and life."

"Our world needs open doors," Francis said, as he lauded the interfaith efforts between Christians and Jews in recent years and urged continued collaboration.

"The blessing of the Most High is poured out upon us, whenever he sees a family of brothers and sisters who respect and love each other and work together," he concluded.

This story appears in the **Pope Francis in Hungary and Slovakia** feature series. View the full series.