Vatican
News



Pilgrims look at the horizon at the Greek Orthodox Monastery of Apostolos Andreas in Karpasia, Cyprus, in 2016. (CNS/Reuters/Yiannis Kourtoglou)



by Christopher White

Former Vatican Correspondent (2021-2025)

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

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

Rome — November 30, 2021
Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

Small islands tend to be the perfect setting for Pope Francis to make big statements.

In July 2013, Francis chose to visit the tiny Italian island of Lampedusa — closer to Tunisia than it is to Sicily — for his first travels outside of Rome as pope. There, on the island that is home to a mere 5,000 inhabitants, Francis put migration at the center of his papal pastoral agenda, calling out the "globalization of indifference" toward their suffering.

In April 2016, Francis again made waves when visiting the small Greek island of Lesbos — home at the time to the largest refugee camp in Europe — by bringing with him 12 Muslim refugees from Syria back to Rome to live in Italy.

And in another grand gesture, Francis is slated to make a rare return visit to Lesbos to further punctuate his focus on the plight of migrants and refugees as a part of his Dec. 2-6 visit to Cyprus and Greece.

"Cyprus currently gets more asylum seekers per capita than any other country in Europe, which is hard to believe because it's already such a small place that is sort of tucked into the southeast corner of Europe," Elizabeth Kassinis of Caritas Cyprus told NCR. "It's sort of far out there."

The location may be remote, but it is a place and a concern close to Francis' heart.

"How many have lost their lives at sea! Today our sea, the Mediterranean, is a great cemetery," he lamented in a video message released on Nov. 27 ahead of his trip, in which he went on to call for fraternity and integration as the only way forward on this issue.

For the pope, who has repeatedly emphasized bridge-building and solidarity among all faiths, and hospitality over hostility, Francis' 35th international trip will serve as an opportunity to boost some of the signature themes of his papacy: migration, synodality and ecumenical outreach.

The last physically divided capital city in the world

St. Paul the Apostle made Cyprus the first stop of his journeys during the first century and converted the island's governor to the Christian faith.

Yet 2,000 years later, the island's 1.2 million residents have been caught in a centurieslong tug of war of ethno-national conflict among Great Britain, Greece and Turkey. Today the capital of Nicosia is the last physically divided capital city in the world.

Cyprus is situated at the crossroads of Europe, the Middle East and North Africa and when Francis arrives on Dec. 2, he will seek to address a complicated audience.



At the "Green Line" dividing the city of Nicosia, Cypress (Wikimedia Commons/Julian Nyča)

During his two-night stay, the pope will be directly speaking to the island's minority Catholics, its majority Greek Orthodox population and its diverse migrant community — and indirectly addressing those on the other side of the country's Green Line, where Turkish Cypriots live in their own state, unrecognized by the international

community.

Franciscan Fr. Jerzy Kraj, the patriarchal vicar for Cyprus of the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem, described Francis' upcoming visit as "a big surprise, a source of joy and a challenge."

Given that the Vatican only confirmed the trip in early November, Kraj told NCR that it has been an all-hands effort organizing the visit and that the effort has helped unify the government, the local Catholic population and the hierarchy of the Orthodox Church.

Cyprus is home to only 30,000 Catholics — 25,000 of whom are of Latin rite and 5,000 of whom are Maronite Catholic — and for Kraj, this trip to a country made up of only 2% Catholics marks another example of "Pope Francis prioritizing those on the peripheries."

The pope's schedule includes meetings with government officials of the Republic of Cyprus; the Orthodox archbishop of Cyprus, His Beatitude Chrysostomos II; the Holy Synod of the Church of Cyprus; and an ecumenical gathering of migrants. A Mass is expected to draw some 5,000 participants.

Kraj said he expected Francis will focus on "the joy of being open to understanding each other."

Reunification efforts on the island have been resoundingly rejected in the last two decades, but Kraj said he does not expect Francis to directly address the political issues, or the "Cyprus Problem," as the dispute between Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots is commonly known.

Instead, he expects Francis will focus on the "social and religious aspects of division" and seek to further goodwill between everyone.

A 'preferential option for the migrant'

No other issue has become synonymous with the Francis papacy than that of migration, and against the backdrop of increasingly difficult situations in both Cyprus and Greece, Francis will once again have a chance to spotlight the issue — along with the efforts Catholic and Orthodox believers are engaged in to address it together.

For Fr. Nicolas Kazarian, director of inter-Orthodox, ecumenical and interfaith relations for the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America, migration is an area in which Francis has "dived into our common witness."



Pope Francis blesses a cross featuring a refugee's life vest during a 2019 meeting at the Vatican with refugees recently arrived in Rome from the Greek island of Lesbos. (CNS/Stefano Dal Pozzolo)

"I would say that Pope Francis is the hero of the 'preferential option for the migrant,' much as Pope John Paul II spoke about the 'preferential option for the poor,'" Kazarian told NCR. "Protecting migrants has become an opportunity for rapprochement with the Orthodox Church and its involvement in ministering to

them."

Caritas Cyprus' Kassinis, who has worked on the island for 20 years, said that her small staff of 10 workers are now receiving some 300-400 refugees a day, up from 100-150 before the COVID-19 pandemic. Even prior to Francis' arrival, the Vatican has already made plans to transfer an estimated 50 migrants back to Italy following the pope's visit.

"Cyprus, like the rest of Europe, is struggling with what to do," Kassinis told NCR, noting that it is a small island with limited potential to create new jobs and opportunities for those seeking to stay.

At a time when phrases like "migrant crisis" are commonly used but individual faces are overlooked, Kassinis hopes Francis' visit will allow for an "open and constructive discussion" rooted in the pope's emphasis on creating a culture of encounter and the inherent dignity of every person.

"Just by virtue of his presence and the strength of his message, I think it forces society to kind of have that discussion, and including the government and the government policy," she said.

Similar hopes are held for when the pope makes his return to visit to the Greek island of Lesbos on Dec. 5.

Though Francis will only be on the ground for just over two hours, Kazarian recalled the pope's five-hour visit in 2016, where he was joined by the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew and Archbishop Ieronymos II of Athens, Greece. Together, the three leaders made an appeal to the international community that Kazarian summed up as "love your neighbors."

It is a message, he believes, the world needs to continue to hear.



Refugees and migrants stand next to a tent in the Mavrovouni camp on the island of Lesbos, Greece, March 29. (CNS/Reuters/Elias Marcou)

"Many populist voices throughout Europe are using this issue to advance their political agendas," Kazarian said. "As countries in the eastern Mediterranean, Cyprus and Greece are at the forefront of this issue [migration], and as Christians we are bound by an ethos of solidarity grounded in the message of the Gospel."

Massimiliano Signifredi of the international Community of Sant'Egidio, which helped arrange for the transfer of three refugee families to Rome during the pope's 2016 Lesbos visit and have since helped welcome nearly 200 more individuals to Italy, told NCR that when Francis first visited the island, the majority of the refugees were Syrian.

Today, he says, the most common nationality of refugees, making up 60% of the camp, is Afghan. While circumstances have changed and the populations differ, Signifredi says Francis' intent is the same.

"He wants to show the world that it is possible to help refugees with a gesture of mercy," he said.

East meets West and the ongoing work of ecumenism

In both Cyprus and Greece, Francis will be welcomed by and meet with leaders of the Orthodox Church — providing him an opportunity to deepen the ecumenical relationships that he has prioritized since his election in 2013 and to elevate the Orthodox Church's synodal structures of governance.

When John Paul II visited Greece in 2001, mass protests filled Athens with signs labeling the pope as the "anti-Christ." There was also marginal opposition to Pope Benedict XVI's visit to Cyprus in 2010, with some Orthodox bishops refusing to attend the meeting at the Orthodox archbishop's residence.

Advertisement

Now, with leaders in both countries eagerly anticipating Francis' arrival, the stage seems set for a very different environment for this papal visit.

Looking ahead to the pope's time in Cyprus and Greece, Aristotle Papanikolaou, co-director of the Orthodox Christian Studies Center at Fordham University, told NCR that "the symbolism is key."

"Especially in an age of polarization today, which includes religious polarization, I think visits like this are more important than ever."

While there is unlikely to be any major joint theological statements to be issued during the five-day trip, Papanikolaou said, "The symbolism of it maintains the ongoing ecumenical dialogue that started after Vatican II."

For the pope, said Papanikolaou, to travel the same steps as the Apostle Paul provides an "opportunity to highlight our common heritage, our common faith" and to remind members of both communities that these "encounters can and should occur."

Such visits, he continued, ensures that "the interpretation of the faith doesn't become a kind of enclave mentality, but a way of recognizing what we have in common."

This story appears in the **Francis in Cyprus and Greece** feature series. View the full series.
A version of this story appeared in the **Dec 10-23, 2021** print issue under the headline: Small islands, big messages.