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Pope Francis arrives in the Clementine Hall of the Apostolic Palace at the Vatican April 14, 20

Pope Francis arrives in the Clementine Hall of the Apostolic Palace at the Vatican April 14, 2023, for an audience with executives and staff of ITA Airways, the Italian government-owned airline that flies the pope on his trips abroad. (CNS photo/Vatican Media)



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Pope Francis confirmed he will travel to Mongolia in September, becoming the first pope to visit the Asian nation, which is home to a cardinal and some 1,300 Catholics.

In an audience April 14 with executives and staff of ITA Airways, the airline that has taken the pope on his international trips since 2021, he said that he will visit Mongolia, a country sandwiched between Russia and China, after traveling to Hungary in late April and Marseille, France, in September.

During an airborne news conference on his return flight from South Sudan in February, the pope told journalists there was a "possibility that from Marseille I will fly to Mongolia."

To the airline workers, Francis said that "God willing" he will leave for his 41st apostolic trip, traveling to Hungary April 28-30 "and then there will be Marseille and Mongolia, and all the others that are on the waiting list."

The pope's trip to Mongolia will be strategic to the Vatican, which has strained relations with neighboring China, primarily due to apparent violations of an agreement between China and the Vatican which outlines procedures for the appointment of bishops.

In August 2022, Francis named Italian Bishop Giorgio Marengo, apostolic prefect of Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia, to be the first cardinal based in Mongolia. Marengo has served in Mongolia since 2003 and at 48 years old is the youngest member of the College of Cardinals.

In the February news conference, Francis specified that his trip to Marseille will not be an apostolic visit to France, but rather he will travel to the city to attend a meeting of Mediterranean bishops. He is scheduled to address the meeting Sept. 23.

"I will go to Marseilles, not to France," he said.

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The pope also said a trip to India could happen next year but made no mention of that to the airline workers.

Meeting the employees of ITA, the successor to Alitalia, Francis said the first papal trip taken by Pope Paul VI to the Holy Land introduced "a new way of carrying out the pope's pastoral ministry, which has enabled the bishop of Rome to reach so many people who would never have been able to make a pilgrimage to Rome."

The pope then noted how St. John Paul II made 104 international trips during the 27 years of his papacy, which made international travel an "integral part of the pontificate." Similarly, Pope Benedict XVI made 24 international trips in his eight years as pope.

Francis has continued the tradition.

"It's important for me to meet people, meet communities, the faithful, believers of other faiths, women and men of goodwill," said Francis. "Meeting in person, speaking in person is different than making oneself present with a message or a video. It's not the same."

The pope thanked the airline staff for helping him bring his ministry to the world, noting that he has "some mobility problems, but thanks to your help I continue traveling."