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Cardinal Giorgio Marengo, apostolic prefect of Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia, center, is pictured celebrating Mass in a March 31, 2018, file photo. Mongolia's Catholic community is one of the world's smallest. (CNS/Courtesy AfMC Torino)



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While the eyes of much of the world are on both Russia and China these days, when Pope Francis lands this week in Mongolia — a nation sandwiched between those two geopolitical hotspots — don't expect the pontiff to be greeted by throngs of wildly enthusiastic fans.

With fewer than 1,500 Catholics, according to Consolata Missionary Fr. Ernesto Viscardi, "there will be no crowds along the roads at his passage shouting 'viva il papa' or waving Vatican flags, as we are normally used to seeing in his visits to other nations."

Even so, according to Viscardi, who has served in the country since 2004, Francis' Sept. 1-4 visit will be the "event of the century for our young church."

No pope has ever visited Russia or China, nor Mongolia. Until now.



This is the logo for Pope Francis' Sept. 1-4 visit to Mongolia and its capital, Ulaanbaatar. (CNS /Holy See Press Office)

By visiting the vast nation of only 3.4 million inhabitants, with one of the world's smallest Catholic communities, Francis, in his distinct way, will put Mongolia on the map.

"Often in his words, we hear expressions like 'go to the outskirts, the peripheries, let us be an outgoing church,' " Viscardi told NCR ahead of Francis' arrival in the country. "And this is what he practiced himself in his many apostolic journeys, especially to those places of major conflicts and tensions."

"Why then not go to the tiniest, and, by numbers, maybe least significant of the Catholic communities?" he asked.

Mongolia will mark the 43rd international visit of Francis' decade-long papacy, during which he has intentionally bypassed major world capitals in favor of visiting places like Kazakhstan, Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates where Catholics are few in number.

As with similar papal trips, this visit by Francis is meant to both encourage the local Catholic community, while bolstering interfaith relations in a nation where all religions are regaining their footing following its Communist era, which ended in the early 1990s.

After breaking from Soviet rule in 1990, Mongolia formed its own constitution in 1992, guaranteeing freedom of religion.

Saskia Adelle Abrahms-Kavunenko, author of *Enlightenment and the Gasping City: Mongolian Buddhism at a Time of Environmental Disarray*, noted that this period was one of a "flurry of activity" when both religious identity and nationalist identity were being reimagined — and the two were highly connected.

While this primarily led to a revival of the country's Buddhist identity — some 53% of the country now identifies as Buddhists — Abrahms-Kavunenko told NCR that this era led to "widespread freedom of religion and an embracing of new religious traditions."

Among them, Catholicism, whose first modern missionaries arrived in the country in 1992.

Viscardi noted that plans for a papal visit by John Paul were underway dating back to then, but they never materialized due to numerous complications.

During his three-night stay in Mongolia's capital of Ulaanbaatar, Francis is scheduled to meet with the country's political and civil authorities, interfaith leaders, the

country's priests and religious men and women — some 75 missionaries — and to celebrate Mass in an indoor hockey arena for the country's small Catholic population, as well as those traveling from nearby Asian countries.

Italian Cardinal Giorgio Marengo — who has served as a missionary to the country for two decades and who Francis elevated to the College of Cardinals in 2022 — has said that he hopes the visit will introduce the country's miniscule Catholic population to the fact that they are part of a much larger, global Catholic community.

But Marengo, who is 49 and the world's youngest Catholic cardinal, has said that in Mongolia, the Gospel is preached through a "whisper" with quiet, interpersonal relationships.

"The Catholic community in Mongolia is a tiny minority, just like the first Christian communities," observed Viscardi, who expects the pope to "strengthen the faith of the members of the community and to look ahead for new challenges."



Cardinal Giorgio Marengo, apostolic prefect of Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia, is pictured with a Buddhist leader in July 13, 2018, file photo. More than half the Mongolian

population is Buddhist. (CNS/Courtesy AfMC Torino)

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Beyond spiritual challenges, Abrahms-Kavunenko noted that Mongolia lies in a difficult backyard and has walked a fine line trying to maintain relationships with tough neighbors.

"In the post-Socialist period, Mongolia has been keen to make friends," she said, speculating about one reason the head of the Catholic Church has been invited for an official state visit.

And in a place where the legacy of its most famous ruler, the 13th-century emperor Genghis Khan, looms large, perhaps one of the most prominent leaders on the global stage today can offer a message to both the descendants in the land of Khan and beyond its borders, especially to nearby Russia and China.

"The pope's presence here will surely send indirectly a message of encouragement to the Catholic communities present in these nations," Viscardi predicted. "It will be a way to say: 'Courage, I am near you.' "

This story appears in the **Pope Francis in Mongolia** feature series. View the full series.