Vatican
Vatican News
A boy gives Pope Francis scarves as he arrives at the headquarters of the Apostolic Prefecture

A boy gives Pope Francis scarves as he arrives at the headquarters of the Apostolic Prefecture of Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia, Sept. 1. Cardinal Giorgio Marengo, the prefect, will host the pope at the prefecture during his four-day visit to the country. (CNS/Vatican Media)



by Christopher White

Former Vatican Correspondent (2021-2025)

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

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

ULAANBAATAR, Mongolia — September 1, 2023
Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

Pope Francis on Sept. 1 arrived in Mongolia, becoming the first pope to visit the vast country with one of the world's smallest Catholic populations, nestled between Russia and China — two nations with complicated Vatican relationships.

China — which shares a nearly 3,000 mile long border with Mongolia — granted the pope's plane permission to travel over its airspace and Francis sent a customary in-flight telegram to Chinese President Xi Jinping offering his prayers "for the wellbeing of the nation."

The Holy See and China do not have formal diplomatic relations, and despite entering into a controversial agreement with China in 2018 over the appointment of bishops in the country, the Vatican's relationship with Chinese officials have grown

increasingly strained in recent months after several violations of their accord.

As the pope departed for Mongolia on Aug. 31, America magazine reported that the United Front Work Department of the Chinese Communist Party had prohibited any bishops or lay Catholics from mainland China from traveling here to participate in any activities related to the papal visit.

The Vatican's press office did not immediately respond to NCR's request for comment on the report.

Francis' plane touched down here in the Mongolian capital just before 10 a.m. local time, where the pontiff was greeted by the country's foreign minister, Battsetseg Batmunkh.

Advertisement

Unlike many papal visits, where the streets are filled with onlookers and well-wishers, here in Mongolia where there are fewer than 1,500 Catholics in a country of 3.4 million inhabitants, there were few noticeable signs that such a high-profile visitor was in town.

En route to Mongolia, the pontiff — who is making the 43rd international visit of his papacy — greeted reporters for 25 minutes, saying Mongolia is a large country best understood not through the intellect, "but through the senses."

When one reporter asked him about the reaction to his remarks published earlier this week criticizing reactionary American Catholics who are resistant to church reform, the pope replied, "They got angry!"

"But," the pontiff continued, "*avanti, avanti*" — using an Italian expression that means "to go forward."

Another reporter showed the pope a canteen riddled with bullets that belonged to a Ukrainian soldier.

"You can’t imagine how hard it is," the pope said about the challenges of global diplomacy. "Sometimes it takes a sense of humor."

Following the nine-and-a-half hour flight from Rome, the 86-year-old Francis will spend the rest of his first day in the country resting, ahead of a full day of meetings on Sept. 2 with the country’s political and diplomatic leaders, followed by a speech to Mongolian priests and missionaries.

Despite the country's minuscule Catholic population, the pope's Sept. 1-4 visit has been described as "the event of the century" for the young, burgeoning church here.

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