Vatican

View from the Vatican



The Louvain-la-Neuve in Belgium is pictured in 2012. (Wikimedia Commons/MaelaC)



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When the Second Vatican Council opened in 1962, the influential French Dominican theologian Fr. Yves Congar is said to have remarked that it was the Council of Louvain, being held in Rome.

Congar's observation was meant to convey that the Catholic University of Louvain, long known as a rich breeding ground for theological activity, was finally being recognized in Rome. Vatican II emphasized the contributions of all the "people of God," and that laity were equal with clergy as participants in the life of the church — and Louvain was educating lay theologians even before the council began.

Perhaps that's one reason Pope Francis — who has dedicated much of his papacy to the implementation of the council — is likely to visit Belgium this year.

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But in conversations with a number of church officials, leading theologians and government officials, the reason the pope wants to make the visit isn't exactly clear, even if it's welcome by most.

"It's hard to say why," Arnaud Join-Lambert, a theologian at the Catholic University of Louvain, admitted to me last month during a visit to Brussels.

As he showed me a plaque in the main square of Louvain-la-Neuve commemorating Pope John Paul II's visit there in 1985, the university campus was largely empty of students who were away on Easter holidays — vastly unlike the visit that drew thousands nearly 40 years ago, or from what would be expected if Francis followed in his predecessor's footsteps.

Plans for the potential papal trip were first made public by the pope himself in a December 2023 interview with veteran Vatican journalist Valentina Alazraki. At the time, the Belgian bishops clarified that it was to mark the 600th anniversary — which takes place in 2025 — of the founding of the University of Leuven. And Louvain.

It's a bit complicated: Founded by Pope Martin V in 1425, there have been several eras in the life of the university, but in the 1960s it was split into two independent

sister universities: the Dutch-speaking KU Leuven and the French-speaking UCL: Université Catholique de Louvain. As one Belgian observer characterized it to me: For Americans it might best be compared to a hypothetical university with an English language faculty and enrollment and another that operates in Spanish.



Arnaud Join-Lambert, a theologian at the Catholic University of Louvain. (Courtesy of Arnaud Join-Lambert)

The request for the papal visit is said to have originated with organizers for the 600th anniversary at KU Leuven, who pushed for the visit and later received the backing of the Belgian bishops and state authorities, capped off by a private visit by Belgium's king to visit the pope in Rome. And though the actual anniversary is in 2025, a Vatican advance team arrived in Belgium in late April to begin to make preparations for the trip, slated at the end of September, as the 2025 Jubilee Year is expected to keep Francis busy in Rome.

With one of the world's leading theology faculties, Join-Lambert suggested that perhaps Francis is hoping to offer a reflection on the relationship between theology

and the higher education, not dissimilar to Pope Benedict XVI's now infamous 2006 Regensburg address on "Faith, Reason and the University: Memories and Reflections."

It would also be an opportunity, Join-Lambert noted, for Francis — the first Latin American pope — to highlight the historically strong ties between the Leuven/Louvain faculties and the Latin American church.

While Francis has historically avoided visiting Western countries and major European capitals in favor of smaller nations, his desire to visit the country that is home to the headquarters of the European Union certainly seems a bit of an outlier. And a potential papal visit is brimming with both opportunities and pitfalls.



Rik Torfs, a former rector of KU Leuven (Courtesy of Rik Torfs)

"Belgium is one of the most secularized countries in Western Europe," said Rik Torfs, a former rector of KU Leuven.

While he described the 1985 visit of Pope John Paul II to the country as an "enormous success," he said that by the time the Polish pope returned a decade later for the beatification of now-St. Damian of Molokai, "the decline was already very visible."

Priestly vocations and baptisms are plummeting, Torfs said, and there are few Catholic public intellectuals that shape national debates. Public opinion, he told me, can also be very hostile to the church — including recent pointed criticisms coming from current Prime Minister Alexander De Croo — and the latest parliamentary inquiry into clergy abuse is expected to loom large over the visit.

Even so, said Join-Lambert, the visit could and should be an opportunity to highlight the role of the country's strong Catholic institutions, especially its schools and hospitals, which he said continue to thrive.

"If we reduce Belgian Catholicism to Sunday practice, we could say that there's not much left compared to the past," he said, adding: "this is a mistaken perspective, which fails to see the very living dimensions of Christian communities, even if the challenges are very difficult, as they are everywhere in the secularized European West."



Sofi Van Ussel, director of youth ministry in Flanders (Courtesy of Sofi Van Ussel)

Similarly, Sofi Van Ussel, director of youth ministry in Flanders, said that Belgium is a "central hub" in Europe, where "diverse cultures and ideas coverage."

A potential papal visit, she said, could represent "a new frontier" with Belgium serving as a "pivotal point for outreach and engagement."

In her view, this likely visit is similar to the pope's own global synodal process that is attempting to make the Catholic Church more participatory and more inclusive and "carries a profound message of hope and renewal," especially for the wide range of voices in both the church and the country.

"It's a reminder that religion is far from outdated — it's a source of resilience and inspiration in our ever-changing world," she added. "The Vatican recognizes Belgium

as a place in need of revitalization, a fertile ground where faith can flourish anew."

Join-Lambert echoed Van Ussel's thinking, saying that while Belgium may be in Western Europe, this pope "chooses to visit small countries facing major challenges."

And Belgium, he continued, "offers a wide range of topics on which a pope can speak."