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A man is pictured in a file photo praying at the San Jose de Flores Church in Buenos Aires, Argentina. (OSV News/Enrique Marcarian, Reuters)

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Santiago del Estero, Argentina — July 30, 2024
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Pope Francis has designated the provincial city of Santiago del Estero as Argentina's primatial see in a move described by Catholic leaders as a historic "reparation" and a reflection of his preference for putting the peripheries at the center of church attention.

The Archdiocese of Buenos Aires — the national capital, with roughly one-third of the country's 46 million inhabitants calling its metropolitan area home — has been the primatial see since 1936. But Santiago del Estero, a city of 225,000 and capital of a province bearing the same name, was part of the first episcopal see established in the late 1500s in what is now northern Argentina.

A July 22 statement from Bishop Vicente Bokalic Iglic of Santiago del Estero and Archbishop Jorge García Cuerva of Buenos Aires confirmed the decision and referenced Santiago del Estero’s role in Argentine church history.

"We understand first of all that it is an honorific emblem, reserved for the first diocese in a national territory, which does not entail any jurisdictional change in the Argentine ecclesiastical organization," the churchmen said.

"The Holy Father, Francis, making an important reparation in the ecclesiastical history in our country, has decided to move the primate see of the republic to Santiago del Estero," they continued.

The papal bull transfering the primatial see will be executed Aug. 25 in Buenos Aires and Sept. 7 in Santiago del Estero.

The Diocese of Santiago del Estero will be made an archdiocese, but still belong to the ecclesial province of Tucumán, while Bokalic will be elevated to archbishop,

according to a July 22 statement from the Vatican and apostolic nunciature in Argentina. Bokalic will also become primate, but not metropolitan bishop.

The first diocese in what is now Argentina was created in 1570 by St. Pius V as the Diocese of Tucumán with its cathedral located in present-day Santiago del Estero, according to the joint statement. The current Diocese of Santiago del Estero was created in 1907.

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"Santiago del Estero for centuries, (dubbed) the glorious title of 'Mother of Cities' and chosen to be the center to spread the Gospels, … is also the 'Mother of Dioceses' in Argentina; therefore there are myriad reasons to honor it as the primatial see," the bishops added in the statement.

Francis has spoken previously of Santiago del Estero as the primatial see. In 2008, then-Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio of Buenos Aires said Santiago del Estero “ought to be the country's primatial see."

Argentina is far from the first country to have a smaller diocese serve as its primatial see. Lyon and Toledo are the primatial sees for France and Spain, respectively, not the national capitals.

Primate, or “primus inter pares” in Latin, is an honorific title with no particular power within the church.

"That is why in many countries the primacy is not the largest city or the capital, but the oldest because evangelization in the place was continued from there," said Auxiliary Bishop Mauricio Landra of Mercedes-Luján speaking to the Latin American and Caribbean Episcopal Council, or CELAM's communication branch.