Vatican

Vatican News



Catholic women carry wooden crosses during a Palm Sunday procession in Dili, East Timor, April 5, 2009. Pope Francis will visit East Timor as part of a four-county trip Sept. 2-13, marking the first time a pope has visited the country since it gained independence from Indonesia in 2002. (CNS/Reuters/Lirio Da Fonseca)



by Christopher White

Former Vatican Correspondent (2021-2025)

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

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

Rome — August 29, 2024
Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

En route back to the Vatican after a whirlwind trip to Mongolia last September, Pope Francis told reporters that international travel had become much more difficult for him, casting doubt on whether the aging pontiff would continue to jetset as he did during the first decade of his papacy.

Now, after almost a year of staying home, Francis — who is pushing 88 years old and continues to battle a number of health issues — will depart Sept. 2 on the longest trip of his papacy: a grueling 12-day journey though four countries in Asia and Oceania that will push his physical abilities but provide him an opportunity to spotlight some of the signature themes of his pontificate.



Pope Francis will travel Sept. 2-13 to Indonesia, Papua New Guinea, Timor-Leste and Singapore. It will be the 45th foreign trip of his pontificate and his longest trip, both in terms of distance and days away from Rome. (CNS graphic/Justin McLellan, with

photo by Pablo Esparza)

"A trip this long is certainly unusual," said veteran Vatican reporter John Thavis. "To do this at 87 suggests to me that Pope Francis is testing his own limits, and perhaps also sending a message to others in the hierarchy that he's still very active, and that this is not a lame-duck papacy."

The nearly two-week Sept. 2-13 trip will take Francis to Indonesia, Papua New Guinea, East Timor and Singapore. It will mark his sixth visit to Asia, allowing him to make good on a promised visit that was tentatively scheduled for 2020 but delayed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Francis "made it clear early in his pontificate that he wanted to prioritize evangelization in Asia," Thavis told the National Catholic Reporter. "Before Francis, it had been more than 20 years since a pope visited the Far East."

And considering his age and physical constraints, Francis' 45th international trip since his election in 2013 could offer a dramatic opportunity to double down on his commitments to interreligious dialogue, rebuilding social solidarity and elevating environmental concerns — not only cementing his own legacy on those issues inside the church, but attracting the attention of the wider world as well.



Pope Francis will travel Sept. 2-13 to Indonesia, Papua New Guinea, East Timor and Singapore. It will be the 45th foreign trip of his pontificate and his longest trip, both in terms of distance and days away from Rome. (CNS graphic/Justin McLellan, with photo by Pablo Esparza)

Interreligious dialogue, climate change in the spotlight

When Francis' plane touches down in the Indonesian capital of Jakarta on Sept. 3 — after a 13-hour flight from Rome — the pope who has dedicated much of his 11-year papacy to trying to galvanize world leaders in the fight against climate change will begin his ambitious journey in a place known as "the sinking city."

With an estimated 40% of the city already below sea level and Indonesian leaders moving ahead with plans to move the capital due to sea rise, Jakarta will serve as a useful backdrop for the pope to reiterate his call for global action to stave off environmental catastrophes.

And he won't be preaching to just the Catholic choir.

Indonesia is the most populous Muslim-majority country in the world and the world's fourth-most-populous country, with Catholics making up just 3% of its 280 million inhabitants.

Related: Pope will visit Jakarta's Istiqlal mosque at start of interfaith Asian trip

Given the unique religious makeup of the country — and the challenges it faces — the pope is expected to use his time in Indonesia to revisit some of the central themes in two of his landmark encyclicals, *Laudato Si'* and *Fratelli Tutti*. They argue that the political, economic and social problems facing the world today must be tackled through a deepening friendship across religious and geographic divides.

"The majority Muslim population have accepted and embraced the Catholic community as an integral part of the nation," said Jesuit Fr. Benedictus Hari Juliawan, who serves as provincial of the Society of Jesus in Indonesia.

Juliawan told NCR that Catholics "punch above their weight" in the country and that overall there is a "harmonious relationship" between religions in the country. Even so, he said some "small and radical" outlier groups have either threatened Catholics with violence or sought to change the county's secular constitution to favor the majority religion.

While Francis is expected to avoid weighing in on many of the current political issues facing the country, he will make a symbolic visit to Jakarta's Istiqlal Mosque, the largest in southeast Asia, which is next to the country's Catholic cathedral and connected by a tunnel.



A Christian holds candles during Christmas prayers at Bethany Church in Surabaya, Indonesia, Dec. 25, 2007. Catholics make up just 3% of the population in the Muslim-majority country. (CNS/Reuters/Sigit Pamungkas)

From Indonesia, the pope will travel to the South Pacific nation of Papua New Guinea for a three-day visit to the capital of Port Moresby and the small town of Vanimo.

Despite being home to tremendous natural resources, some 40% of the country lives in poverty — fueled by government instability, corruption, gang violence and natural disasters. According to Presentation Sr. Imelda Suyai, the pope will have a prime opportunity to address local concerns, such as tribal infighting, natural disasters, violence against women and girls, and rising inequality.

From there, Francis will head to East Timor (also known as Timor-Leste), marking the first time a pope has visited the country since it gained independence from Indonesia in 2002.

With nearly 98% of the country identifying as Catholic, it boasts the highest percentage of Catholics in the world (outside Vatican City) with its time as a former Portuguese colony still leaving a strong imprint on the tiny nation.

> 'I can imagine Pope Francis' advisers telling him he shouldn't make this trip, for health reasons. And I can imagine Francis making his own decision and doing his own thing, which has been a hallmark of his pontificate.'
> —John Thavis
>
> Tweet this

According to Marist Br. Tony Caddy, "Catholic schools and government schools all have a very Catholic flavor with religious ceremonies being conducted at all establishments." Even the local police choir sings at Masses, he said.

While he said there is broad respect for religion, he hopes the pope's visit can help galvanize the church's efforts to prioritize its fight against poverty and health disparities.

"The major challenge facing the church is to maintain contact with all people and not become the church for the well-off," he told NCR. "The church has to maintain its focus on the people, on their education and development, keeping that pioneering spirit which helped it recover from occupation by Indonesia for so many years."



Pope John Paul II kisses a rain-soaked tarmac as he arrives in Jakarta, Indonesia, on a pastoral trip in 1989. Indonesia is one of four countries Pope Francis will visit Sept. 2-13. (CNS/L'Osservatore Romano)

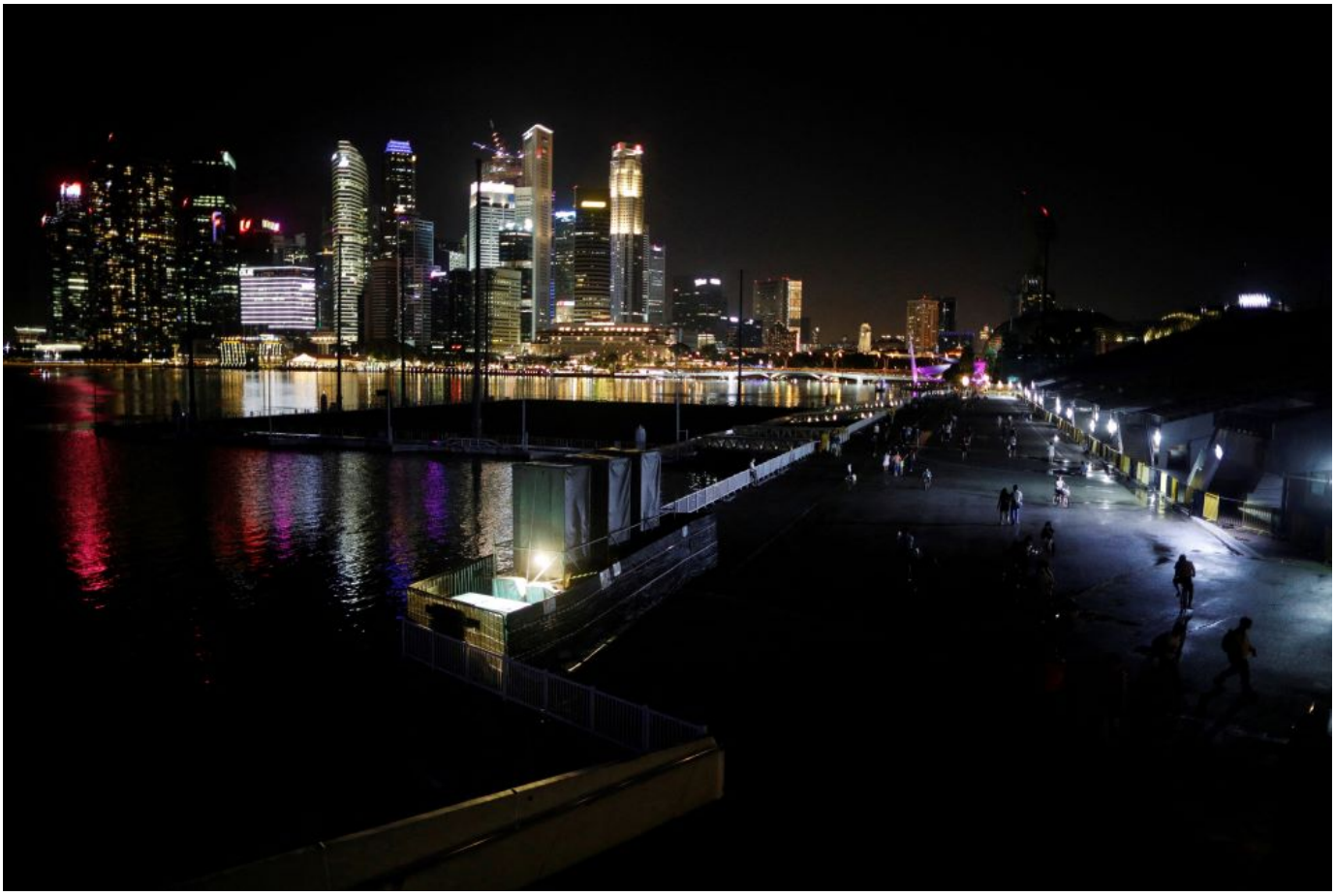
Also expected to loom large over the pope's visit will be the case of Bishop Carlos Ximenes Belo, who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1996 and retired in 2002 for health reasons. In 2022, the Holy See confirmed a Dutch media report that it had secretly sanctioned Belo in 2020 for his abuse of young boys and sent him to live in Portugal. While many devout Timorese have continued to defend the bishop who helped campaign for a peaceful independence, many questions remain about the Vatican's handling of the case.

From the poverty and destitution of Indonesia, Papua New Guinea and East Timor, Francis will conclude his trip in Singapore, Asia's wealthiest nation.

It may seem incongruous for a pope that has prioritized solidarity with the poor and marginalized to conclude such a sweeping trip in a place that's home of big banks and commercial excess, said Michel Chambon, a research fellow at the National University of Singapore's Asia Research Institute. But there's more synergy between the Holy See and Singapore than first meets the eye, he said.

"Singapore and the Vatican are very, very small countries with very, very big global ambitions," he told NCR.

"Both of them for their survival have to engage with global dynamics," he said, adding that natural avenues for collaboration and partnership exist.



The Singapore city skyline is pictured in a Dec. 31, 2020, photo. Pope Francis upcoming trip includes visits to Jakarta, the Indonesian capital, Sept. 3-6; Port Moresby and Vanimo, Papua New Guinea, Sept. 6-9; Dili, the capital of East Timor, Sept. 9-11; and Singapore Sept. 11-13. (OSV News/Reuters/Edgar Su)

Further, Singapore is the most religiously diverse country on earth, which will give the pope a final opportunity to drill down on his message of peace and pluralism as he concludes his swing through Asia.

Chambon noted that when the pope hosts his interreligious dialogue event in Singapore, it will not take place at a mosque or another religious institution, but at a Catholic school.

Such a venue, he says, shows that a Catholic school has become a natural home for interreligious dialogue by welcoming people of all faiths and none.

"We grow together, we learn together, we live together," said Chambon.

Advertisement

A pope of the peripheries makes a final push

From the outset of his papacy, this pope who has continuously prioritized the peripheries has made headlines for his visits to active war zones, tiny Christian communities and Muslim-majority nations.

In that sense, this visit to this pocket of the globe is almost ordinary. But considering the realities of the pope's age and his health, many view the undertaking as a determined push to ensure that the causes and concerns that he's dedicated much of his papacy to remain a priority.

"I can imagine Pope Francis' advisers telling him he shouldn't make this trip, for health reasons," Thavis said. "And I can imagine Francis making his own decision and doing his own thing, which has been a hallmark of his pontificate."

"I don't think being on the road for nearly two weeks scares this pope. In fact, the prospect of getting out of the Vatican for that long probably excites him. It's been nearly a year since his last foreign trip, and his agenda has been focused on internal church affairs during that time," he added. "I think he relishes the chance to shift the focus to the wider world."

This story appears in the **Francis in Asia and Oceania** feature series. View the full series.

A version of this story appeared in the **Sept 13-26, 2024** print issue under the headline: 2-week Asia trip will test pope's health, spotlight his signature themes.