Vatican

Vatican News



A view of Brussels, Belgium's capital, is seen from the Catholic National Basilica of the Sacred Heart. Pope Francis will visit Luxembourg and Belgium Sept. 26-29. (Wikimedia Commons/Zairon)



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After a nearly two-week trek through Asia and Oceania earlier this month that marked the longest and farthest trip of his papacy, Pope Francis again hits the road this week on a visit to two of Europe's smallest countries. There, he will be forced to confront some of the church's biggest challenges, including the clergy sexual abuse crisis, a shortage of priests, and a decline in church attendance.

"The contrast between these two trips will indeed be significant," Vincent Delcorps, editor-in-chief of CathoBel, a Belgian Catholic news site, said ahead of Francis' Sept. 26-29 visit to Luxembourg and Belgium.

Less than two weeks after visiting countries where the church is rapidly growing, even in areas where it is a minority, Francis' outing will be to the heart of Europe, where Catholicism has long been in decline. His 46th international trip as pope will offer a stark contrast to the peripheries that he has long preferred.

On the ground, local organizers see the visit as an opportunity to inject new life into ancient structures, but there are high risks involved.

The nearly 88-year-old Francis, who earlier this week canceled his appointments due to what the Vatican described as a mild flu, will fly first from Rome to Luxembourg on Sept. 26. His jam-packed day includes four meetings with government officials and the country's Catholic leadership during his less than eight hours in the country.



Cardinal Jean-Claude Hollerich of Luxembourg (CNS/Lola Gomez)

"We have a small church in a very rich country, a post-Christian country, which used to be as Catholic as Ireland was in the past," Jesuit Cardinal Jean-Claude Hollerich of Luxembourg told NCR. "And like Ireland, we have lost the faith."

But the cardinal, who is one of the pope's closest advisers, said that there is still a "living church" in Luxembourg due to the fact half of the country's population is migrants who continue to live out the faith in dynamic ways.

Though it will be a brief stay, Hollerich said he hopes the pope's visit will offer a "deeper spirituality" that reminds Catholics that the faith is not a set of ideas, but an

encounter.

"We have a problem of transmitting faith to the young people," he admitted. "If faith is only a set of truths, but not something experienced, we cannot transmit it. We have to transform ourselves first to transmit the faith."

From Luxembourg, the pope will take a short 55-minute flight to neighboring Belgium, a country where church-run hospitals and schools remain strong, but where Mass attendance has plummeted. The dominant story about the church in the past year has been the fallout resulting from a devastating documentary on clergy abuse. The 2023 TV series prompted the Belgian Federal Parliament and the regional Flemish assembly to launch investigations.

> 'For Catholics in Belgium, the challenge will not be to show that they are still numerous, but rather that they are still very much alive,' said Vincent Delcorps, editor-in-chief of CathoBel.
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The stated purpose of the trip has been for the pope to mark the 600th anniversary of the founding of the Catholic University of Leuven. The institution is home to one of the world's leading theology faculties that has played a role in the education of laypeople after the 1962-65 Second Vatican Council.

The pope will also meet with the country's government and church leaders and celebrate a Mass in Brussels that is expected to draw a crowd of more than 35,000 Catholics.

"For Catholics in Belgium, the challenge will not be to show that they are still numerous, but rather that they are still very much alive," Delcorps told NCR. "This is something Belgian society sometimes tends to forget."

Delcorps noted that tickets for papal Mass — the first in the country since Pope John Paul II last visited in 1995 — were "sold out" within just a few hours. A Catholic youth festival timed to coincide with the pope's visit is expected to draw thousands.



Archbishop Luc Terlinden of Mechelen-Brussels discusses preparations for the Sept. 29 papal Mass at the King Baudouin Stadium in Brussels with Fr. Luc Van Hilst, dean of the basilica in Scherpenheuvel-Zichem, who will be the ceremonialist for the papal Mass; Alexis Brouhns, national coordinator of the papal visit to Belgium; and Bruno Spriet, secretary-general of the Belgian bishops' conference. (OSV News/Courtesy of Patrick du Bois)

Still, there's no doubt that the country has rapidly secularized in the three decades since it last played host to a pope, due to a mix of both demographic changes and self-inflicted wounds.

Earlier this year, the pope finally laicized a well-known Belgian bishop who had admitted to sexually abusing his nephew 14 years ago. Until March 2024, Roger Vangheluwe had faced no formal Vatican punishment.

Meanwhile, the Flemish parliament recently unanimously adopted a resolution that included more than 100 recommendations in response to clergy sexual abuse.

There is the likelihood of some abuse-related protests while the pope is in Brussels, the Belgian capital.

Lieve Halsberghe, a Belgian advocate for abuse survivors, said she believes that the trip has been organized as a "counter-reaction" to the fallout from the documentary, which exposed decades of abuse and cover-up.

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The Belgian bishops have announced that Francis will meet privately with 15 sexual abuse survivors during his visit. But Halsberghe told NCR she believes that the meeting will mostly be symbolic and that the Vatican has little interest in transparency.

"They will only admit a tiny part, but will keep hidden documents and information that victims need to heal," she said. "Victims need the truth to heal and that is something the Vatican cannot handle."

As for how this will affect the overall reception of the pope on the trip, Halsberghe said that "most Belgians think Francis is a good pope," but she said it's because they only know a fraction of the church's mishandling of abuse cases.

For his part, Delcorps said he believes the issue of abuse will be very present throughout the trip, but "more analyzed by mainstream media than by Catholics themselves."

In today's secular Belgium, Delcorps observed, the local church has become known for its openness on LGBTQ issues and on women's leadership. Many Catholics will be listening attentively to what the pope might have to say on this front, Delcorps said, and, most importantly, looking to whether Francis — and this visit — will help chart a way out of the church's current decline.

This story appears in the **Francis in Luxembourg and Belgium** feature series. View the full series.