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Pope Francis to visit marginalized communities in Mexico in February

by Carol Glatz by Catholic News Service

Francis in Mexico

Vatican City — Pope Francis will visit some of the most marginalized communities in Mexico and seek to bring hope to a country suffering from crime, corruption and inequality when he visits Feb. 12-17.

Francis will stop in six cities, including two in the state of Chiapas and -- across from El Paso, Texas -- Ciudad Juárez, which just five years ago was considered the "murder capital of the world" as drug cartels disputed a trafficking corridor.

The pope said in November that he wanted to visit cities where St. John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI never went. But he said he will stop at the capital of Mexico City to pray at the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe. "But if it wasn't for Our Lady," he wouldn't go there, he had told reporters.

The pope will fly out of and return to Mexico City each day after celebrating Mass at the basilica on the second day of his trip.

Over the following four days, he will visit a pediatric hospital in the capital as well as families and indigenous communities in the southernmost state of Chiapas, Mexico's poorest state, which gained worldwide attention for the 1990s Zapatista rebellion.

NCR's Vatican correspondent, Joshua J. McElwee, will be traveling with the pope. *NCR* will have additional reporters in Chiapas and Ciudad Juárez during the trip. Watch for coverage on <http://ncronline.org/feature-series/francis-mexico> and a full report in the next print issue.

Francis will visit young people and religious in Morelia, celebrate Mass on the Mexican-U.S. border in Ciudad Juárez and visit its infamous Cereso state prison, where at least 20 people were killed during riots in 2009 triggered by rival gangs among the prisoners.

"We are certain that the presence of the Holy Father will confirm us in the faith, hope and charity and will help the church move ahead in its permanent mission," the Mexican bishops' conference said in a Dec. 12 statement. "It will encourage believers and nonbelievers and commit us to the construction of a just Mexico, with solidarity, reconciliation and peace."

Fr. Oscar Enríquez, parish priest and director of the Paso del Norte Human Rights Center in Ciudad Juárez, told Catholic News Service that Juárez is often seen as an example of overcoming extreme violence. "The pope always looks for the peripheries. Juárez is the periphery of Mexico and it's a place migrants pass through."

Fr. Patricio Madrigal, pastor of Our Lady of Guadalupe Parish in the Michoacán city of Nueva Italia, said that by visiting Morelia, the pope "wants to be closer to an area beaten down by violence. He wants to bring comfort and also closeness."

The pope's meeting with young people and religious in Morelia is important, Madrigal said, as the church there works to keep kids out of the cartels, provide priests with support, and "strengthen us in the faith and our work in attending to victims of violence."

Priests in the rugged Tierra Caliente region there had lent moral and spiritual support to vigilantes arming themselves to run off a drug cartel in 2013.

Francis "wants to give young people a message of hope and that they stay away from the temptation of

violence," Madrigal said.

Here is the pope's itinerary as released by the Vatican. Times listed are local. The places the pope will visit are on Central Standard Time, except Ciudad Juárez, which is on Mountain time.

Friday, Feb. 12

12:30 p.m. Departure from Rome's Fiumicino Airport.

7:30 p.m. Arrive at Benito Juárez International Airport in Mexico City.

Saturday, Feb. 13

9:30 a.m. Welcoming ceremony at the National Palace, Mexico City, with the president of the republic.

11:30 a.m. Meeting with Mexico's bishops in the city's cathedral.

5 p.m. Mass in the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe. Homily by pope.

Sunday, Feb. 14

10:30 a.m. Fly by helicopter to the "study center" of Ecatepec for Mass.

4:30 p.m. Return to Mexico City for visit to the Federico Gómez Children's Hospital.

6 p.m. Meeting in the National Auditorium with representatives of culture.

Monday, Feb. 15

7:30 a.m. Fly to San Cristóbal de las Casas, Chiapas.

10:15 a.m. Mass at the city's sports center with the indigenous community.

1 p.m. Lunch with representatives of the indigenous community.

4:15 p.m. Meeting with families at the Victor Manuel Reyna Stadium at Tuxtla Gutiérrez. Speech by pope.

6:10 p.m. Return to Mexico City.

Tuesday, Feb. 16

7:50 a.m. Fly to Morelia.

10 a.m. Mass with priests, seminarians, religious men and women.

4:30 p.m. Meeting with young people at the José María Morelos y Pavón Stadium.

6:55 p.m. Return to Mexico City.

Wednesday, Feb. 17

8:35 a.m. Fly to Ciudad Juárez.

10:30 a.m. Visit to Cereso prison.

12 p.m. Meeting with workers and employers at the Colegio de Bachilleres of the Mexican state of Chihuahua.

4 p.m. Mass at the fairgrounds of Ciudad Juárez.

7:15 p.m. Return to Rome.

[Contributing to this story was David Agren in Mexico City.]

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