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Waiting for the pope: Vatican flags, human wall -- and hope for peace

by David Agren by Catholic News Service

LEON, Mexico (CNS) -- Thousands of Catholics formed a human wall lining parts of the highway and boulevards leading into and through this industrial city of shoe factories and tanneries in anticipation of Pope Benedict's arrival March 23 -- his first visit to Mexico since being elected in 2005.

Many dressed in white T-shirts and waved Vatican flags as they waited in the hot sun. Others chanted support slogans and screamed as motorists honked horns while passing. Some even began lining up in the predawn hours.

"We're super excited," said Carmen Fuentes, who occupied her spot in Leon more than eight hours before pope's scheduled arrival with her three children and a group from the St. Peter the Apostle Parish. "Leon is a very blessed city."

In Leon, 220 miles northeast of Mexico City, and the surrounding municipalities of Silao and Guanajuato, Pope Benedict visits a region where Catholic roots run deep and residents remain loyal to the church -- 94 percent, according to the 2010 census.

Support for the pope and the church were on open display in Leon. Church leaders say they want to see this support replicated in other parts of Mexico, where people often bring an enthusiasm for their faith, but channel it toward improper practices -- such the veneration of pseudo saints -- and largely stay on the sidelines of parish life.

Archbishop Carlos Aguiar Retes of Tlalnepantla, president of the Mexican bishops' conference, told Catholic News Service the church is hoping for spiritual renewal with the pope's trip, along with instruction.

"The church," Archbishop Aguiar said, "needs to move from having a faithful base attending services to having a missionary focus, giving a testimony that is based in disciple training that they hear in the word of God."

Archbishop Aguiar said the pope would address issues such as violence and poverty that affect everyday life for Mexicans.

Those issues surfaced frequently in the comments of those lining the pope's 20-mile route from the airport in Silao to Miraflores College, where he was to stay in Leon.

Mariantonia Barron, who came from a small town near Silao with her three children, husband and mother-in-law to the roadway near the airport, commented, "I'm so excited that I couldn't sleep," but also said she hoped the pope's visit would calm the violence in the country and remind Mexicans of Christian values.

"The root of all this (violence) is that we're not trained well in our faith," she said.

Violence related to drug cartels and organized crime has surged over the past five years, claiming more than 47,000 lives and bringing forms of lawlessness such as kidnap and extortion.

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Leon and the region the pope will visit have been spared the worst of the violence, but federal and state officials were taking no chances in security preparations. Some 13,500 soldiers and police personnel, along with Mexico's presidential protection service, will be based in Guanajuato for the visit.

Organizers insist that they're ready for Pope Benedict's trip -- barely. Details of the trip were only announced Jan. 1, giving little time to prepare, said Father Manuel Corral, spokesman for the Mexican bishops' conference.

Pope Benedict was scheduled to meet with President Felipe Calderon upon his arrival at the airport and March 24 in Guanajuato and also hold an event with children the same day.

Mass will be celebrated for an expected 300,000 people March 25 in Guanajuato Bicentennial Park, next to a General Motors plant in Silao and below a giant Christ statue considered symbolic for Catholics remembering the 1920s Cristero Rebellion against anti-clerical provisions.

Pope Benedict departs for Cuba the following day.

While excitement has been palpable in Guanajuato, the number of visitors coming to the state for the papal encounter might be lower than expected.

Maria Uniz and nine members of Our Lady of Fatima Parish in San Clemente, Calif., brought a sign to welcome the pope.

"This is the representative of Christ walking these roads here," she said.

Her group appeared to be the exception: Most people waiting to welcome Pope Benedict were local, reflecting perceptions the pope's visit is failing to generate much interest or excitement beyond Guanajuato -- even though organizers distributed tickets for the Mass in all of Mexico's 91 dioceses.

A campground in a major Leon park with medical services onsite was opened in anticipation of an onslaught of visitors, but only three tents were pitched as of the morning of March 25.

"I don't think they're even going to arrive," said a park security guard, Diego Carmona.

National media coverage also has been skeptical and focused on some of the politics of the visit. Pope Benedict arrives just seven days before campaigns kick off for the 2012 presidential election -- something unimaginable when Blessed John Paul II arrived in Mexico for the first time in 1979.

All three of the major party candidates will attend the Mass, although one candidate's request for an audience with the pope was not granted.

Victor Ramos Cortes, a professor at the University of Guadalajara, said Mexico's political institutions and political parties have suffered crises of legitimacy, and leaders in the political class view closer relations with the church and pontiff a means for regaining it.

The church, meanwhile, has pushed for an agenda of expanded religious freedom in Mexico, where the role of Catholics in public life and making pronouncements on public policy issues -- such as social matters, including abortion and same-sex marriages -- remains controversial.

Any criticisms seemed absent from Guanajuato in the anticipation of the pope's arrival.

"I came here for the love of the pope," said Alicia Soles Gomez, 60.

Added her daughter-in-law, Barron, "It's something that going to stay in our hearts forever."

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