

Humble pope asks permission to enter Brazil

John L. Allen Jr. | Jul. 22, 2013 NCR Today
World Youth Day 2013
Rio de Janeiro

Arguably, there's no one on the planet with less need to ask permission to enter Brazil right now than Pope Francis.

Local church sources say approximately 700,000 pumped-up young believers flooded into Rio de Janeiro over the weekend before Francis even arrived, a wave that's expected to crest with a million and a half pilgrims, or more, for the big events on the pope's itinerary later this week.

Brazilian authorities have spent the last several weeks -- not to mention an estimated \$60 million in public funds -- on security and logistical preparations for the pope's trip, seeing it as a chance to project a good news story about the country. Brazil's agitated protestors, meanwhile, have expressed delight that such an acclaimed moral authority is in town, seeing it as chance to make their case.

Everyone, it seems, wants Francis here. Yet in keeping with his self-effacing style, the new pope didn't take anything for granted.

Saying he wanted to "knock gently" at Brazil's door, Francis began his brief remarks shortly after touching down at Rio's international airport Monday with a surprising request: "I ask permission to come in and spend this week with you," he said.

Although there was no formal reply, there was certainly no objection, either.

During remarks at the presidential palace, delivered in Portuguese, Francis said it was God's "loving providence" that his maiden voyage takes him back to his native Latin America.

"I have neither silver nor gold," the pope said, "but I bring with me the most precious thing given to me: Jesus Christ!" The line brought applause from the crowd at the palace.

The pope got a good reminder of the realities of urban life in Latin America as he made his way from Rio's airport to the presidential palace, becoming ensnarled in some typical downtown traffic around rush hour.

He ended up taking a helicopter to the palace, arriving an hour behind schedule.

Once he arrived, Francis noted that the horizon of his outing, which lasts through Sunday, goes farther than the borders of his host nation because a World Youth Day is actually addressed to the entire globe.

Speaking of young people drawn to Rio from across the globe, Francis said, "They want to find a refuge in [Christ's] embrace, close to his heart, to listen again to his clear and powerful appeal: 'Go and make disciples of all the nations.' "

Francis asked young people to "create a world of brothers and sisters."

In a typical gesture of personal simplicity, when Francis needed to put on reading glasses to deliver his speech, he produced them himself out of a pocket rather than having them handed to him by an aide.

The pope also laid out a challenge for older generations in terms of their responsibility toward youth, asking them to provide "the material and spiritual conditions for their full development," including "safety and education" as well as "lasting values."

Francis urged that "a legacy of a world worthy of human life" be passed on to youth so they may be "builders of their own destiny."

Later Monday, Francis will be formally welcomed at Brazil's presidential palace and will have a brief, behind-closed doors meeting with embattled President Dilma Rousseff, who has seen her once-strong approval ratings evaporate as turmoil has gripped the country.

On background, some Brazilian security officials expressed concern to local media Monday about the pope's exposure during his seven-day itinerary, such as his use of an open-air jeep rather than the bulletproof popemobile.

Officials also expressed confidence, however, that the recent street protests in Brazil, sparked by outrage over public spending on the 2014 World Cup and the 2016 Olympics while services such as education, health care and transportation languish, will not disrupt the pope's schedule.

Later this week, organizers have announced plans for a new round of protests under the banner, "Pope, see how we're treated!"

Tuesday is a rest day for the 76-year-old Francis ahead of his pilgrimage Wednesday to the famed Marian shrine of Aparecida.

It was in Aparecida in 2007 that the bishops of Latin America officially called for a "Great Continental Mission," reviving the missionary energies of the church and paying special attention to those on the margins of society, meaning especially the poor who populate the continent's barrios and favelas.

The primary author of that document was Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio of Buenos Aires, Argentina, who is today Pope Francis.

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