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Returning to Rome, pope discusses plans for future trips

by Cindy Wooden by Catholic News Service

Vatican City — At the end of his first foreign trip, Pope Francis told reporters it's good for a pope to travel, and there are plans in the works for visits in Italy, to Jerusalem, to Asia, but nothing planned soon for his Argentine homeland.

"I think papal trips are always good," he said July 28 during the flight back to Rome after a week in Brazil.

The July 22-29 papal trip was good for Brazil "not just because of the pope's presence, but because for World Youth Day they mobilized and did so well that it will help the whole church," he said.

As for future foreign trips, Pope Francis said there was "nothing definite-definite," but "I can tell you what I'm thinking."

What is definite, he said, are a Sept. 22 trip to Cagliari in southern Italy to visit the shrine of Our Lady of Bonaria, the Marian title that led to the name of the pope's hometown, Buenos Aires, and an Oct. 4 trip to Assisi for the feast of St. Francis.

He also said he hoped to make a one-day trip to northern Italy to visit his relatives with whom he speaks often by phone but has not had an opportunity to visit since becoming pope in March.

Pope Francis said he hoped to be able to fulfill an idea proposed by Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople, who suggested they meet in Jerusalem in 2014 to commemorate the 50th anniversary of Pope Paul VI's meeting with Patriarch Athenagoras, a meeting that set the stage for Catholic-Orthodox reconciliation and dialogue.

"The government of Israel also gave me a special invitation to go to Jerusalem and I think the Palestinian Authority did as well," he said.

Pope Francis said he had hoped to go to Istanbul in November for the feast of St. Andrew, the patron of the ecumenical patriarchate, but "it was not possible with my schedule. If we meet each other, it will be in Jerusalem."

As for Latin America, the pope said he did not think he would return soon.

"A Latin American pope, his first trip is to Latin America," and going again would be too much, he said. "We must wait a while."

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The pope said that of course he misses Buenos Aires, "but it is a serene kind of missing."

"I think it is possible to go to Asia, but this is all up in the air," he said. "I have invitations to go to Sri Lanka and to the Philippines. I must go to Asia," he said, because Pope Benedict XVI did not manage to visit the continent in his eight-year pontificate and Asia "is important."

Although Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi, the Vatican spokesman, told reporters before the trip that Pope Francis gave no special directions about what he wanted for the flight, the pope told reporters he had, in fact, requested that Alitalia make no special arrangements for him and, specifically, that they not install a bed for him.

"I'm up front in a great seat that's very comfortable, normal, one like everyone else has" in first class, he said. "I had a letter written and a phone call made to say that I didn't want a special setup on the airplane."

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