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Pope confirms travel to Mexico, Cuba

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Pope Benedict XVI waves as he leaves after celebrating Mass to mark the feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe in St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican Dec. 12. (CNS photo/Paul Haring)

VATICAN CITY -- Celebrating the feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe and confirming he will travel to Mexico and Cuba in the spring, Pope Benedict XVI called on the people of Latin America to hold firm to their faith.

During his homily at the Mass Dec. 12 in St. Peter's Basilica, the pope prayed that God would guide the decisions of the Latin American people, so they could progress in "building a society based on the development of good, the triumph of love and the expansion of justice."

Pope Benedict added that he intends "to make an apostolic trip to Mexico and Cuba before Easter to proclaim the word of Christ and to strengthen the conviction that this is a precious time to evangelize with a steady faith, a lively hope and an ardent charity."

Various Spanish language news outlets have reported the trip will take place between March 23 and March 29.

In addition to marking the feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe, patroness of the Americas, the pope's Mass marked the bicentennials of many Latin American countries, which gained their independence from Spain between 1810 and 1825.

The pope said he could not let the anniversaries pass without demonstrating "the joy of the church for the many gifts which God, in his infinite goodness, has bestowed on these beloved nations throughout these years."

The bicentennial celebrations should not only recall historical, social and political events, he said, they also should include recognition of the Christian faith of the vast majority of the region's people and how that faith contributed to the development of society.

The Mass was celebrated in Spanish, Portuguese and Latin with several musical pieces -- including the Kyrie and Gloria -- drawn from the "Misa Criolla," a 1964 composition in Spanish that includes elements of Latin American folk music. Latin American musicians sang and played traditional instruments such as the bombo drum, flute, guitars and various percussion instruments like goat nails.

Preceding the Mass, young people from Latin America and the Caribbean walked down the central aisle carrying flags from their home country; some wore colorful traditional costumes.

Concelebrating with the pope were Cardinals Tarcisio Bertone, Vatican secretary of state; Marc Ouellet, president of the Pontifical Commission for Latin America; Norberto Rivera Carrera of Mexico City; and Raymundo Damasceno Assis of Aparecida, Brazil.

Pope Benedict said that, as the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean continue to develop and gain a greater role in the international community, they must "safeguard the rich treasure of faith and their historic-cultural dynamism."

The values they must continue to promote include "always being defenders of human life from the moment of conception until natural death and promoters of peace; they must also safeguard the genuine nature and mission of the family," strengthen schools and help parents prepare their children to be good and upright citizens, he said.

Appearing with indigenous features to the Indian Juan Diego in 1531, Our Lady of Guadalupe showed the indigenous people that her son was their savior as well, the pope said. "She always leads us to her divine son, who is revealed as the foundation of the dignity of every human being (and) as a love stronger that the power of evil and death."

The pope said the region's people also must promote reconciliation and solidarity, do more to protect the environment and "strengthen efforts to overcome poverty, illiteracy and corruption and eradicate all forms of injustice, violence, criminality, citizens' insecurity, drug trafficking and extortion."

The pope entrusted to Our Lady of Guadalupe his intentions and the destiny of the peoples of Latin America and the Caribbean as they seek a better future.

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