

Weekend Coverage: The pope in Mexico and Cuba

John L. Allen Jr. | Mar. 23, 2012



Pope Benedict XVI greets the crowd gathered for his arrival at Guanajuato International Airport in Silao, Mexico, March 23. (CNS photo/Paul Haring)

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Pope Benedict XVI is on the 23rd foreign trip of his papacy but his first to Spanish-speaking Latin America. (He visited Brazil in 2007.) Benedict will spend the weekend in Mexico, then move Monday to Cuba before returning to Rome late Wednesday.

At one level, this is a tale of two different trips.

The pope's swing in Mexico will likely amount to a celebration of popular Catholicism, with about 3 million exuberant faithful expected to turn out. It also comes just ahead of national elections in July, raising fears of manipulation of the trip for political ends, especially given perceptions that the Mexican church is aligned in favor of the conservative National Action Party. However, Mexican Cardinal Javier Lozano Barragán, a retired Vatican official who will accompany the pope, recently insisted that trying to see the trip through the prism of electoral politics "would be like forcing the ocean into an oyster."

In Cuba, meanwhile, the pope comes to bring aid and comfort to a church that has long been suffocated by a hostile regime, shrunk by decades of state-imposed atheism to just 10 percent of the population, as measured by regular Mass attendance. Yet Cuban Catholicism still possesses impressive resilience, and is widely seen as the lone social institution able to extract concessions on human rights from the Castro government.

Officially, Benedict is visiting Mexico to commemorate the 20th anniversary of full diplomatic relations with the Holy See, while the occasion in Cuba is the 400th anniversary of the El Cobre sanctuary of Our Lady of Charity, Cuba's Catholic patroness. Wags have long joked that under Castro, the real patron saint is actually Che Guevara, but devotion to the Virgin of Charity is undergoing a renaissance as the state's grip on the church has loosened.

As has happened to Benedict on many of his other foreign trips, he may benefit from low expectations.

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