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Francis plans dramatic pro-immigrant outing

by John L. Allen Jr.

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Pope Francis

For Europeans, especially Italians, the southern Mediterranean island of Lampedusa has become what the deserts along the Mexican/U.S. border have long been for Americans -- the scene of appalling humanitarian tragedies as desperate migrants try to reach a better life as well as a metaphor for political and cultural tensions over immigration policy.

The fact that Pope Francis has chosen Lampedusa for his first visit outside Rome on Monday, therefore, is anything but casual.

To get a sense of its impact, imagine a newly elected president of the United States announcing that his first trip outside D.C. would be to the border to see for himself where people have died and to embrace detainees in an ICE facility. It would be taken as a bold way of proclaiming that compassion will be a hallmark of the new administration. That's exactly how Italians, and Europeans generally, are reacting to Francis' planned outing.

Traveling without the usual pomp, Francis is scheduled to arrive Monday morning to embrace migrants who've made it to Lampedusa, mostly from Africa and the Middle East, and to mourn those who died along the way. The Vatican announced the trip just a week in advance, suggesting it's a highly personal decision.

The trip has an interreligious dimension, given that a large share of those who wash up on the island are Muslims. It also has clear political subtext, including in the United States where Catholic bishops are leading the charge for immigration reform.

Part of the Italian province of Sicily, Lampedusa traditionally has been known for good fishing and great

beaches. Over the last decade, however, it's become a primary point of arrival for migrants attempting to cross the Mediterranean toward Europe. They often set out in overcrowded and dangerous boats, with many drowning en route.

The Community of Sant'Egidio, a Catholic movement that champions immigrant rights, estimates that 19,000 people have died this way between 1998 and today.

Most recently, eight drowned in mid-June after a small craft designed for a dozen people, but actually carrying more than hundred, capsized. Survivors said they clung to a giant tuna net being dragged behind a nearby Tunisian fishing boat, only to watch the crew cut the net when some of the migrants tried to climb aboard.

Eventually, the Italian Coast Guard showed up and took the survivors to Lampedusa.

A Vatican statement said Francis was "deeply touched" by the shipwreck, calling it "the latest in a series of analogous tragedies." It said the pope intends "to pray for those who lost their lives at sea, to visit the survivors and refugees present, to encourage the residents of the island, and to appeal to everyone's responsibility to take care of these brothers and sisters in extreme need."

When Francis arrives, he'll board one of the Coast Guard vessels used to rescue migrants and head out to sea, tossing a wreath into the water in memory of those who've died. He'll then return to the dock to meet with refugees before saying Mass at a sports center and visiting a local parish.

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Pointedly, Francis has requested that the only authorities on hand be local -- no VIPs from the Italian political scene and no retinue of princes of the church.

Writing in *La Repubblica* on Tuesday, Vatican-watcher Paolo Rodari reported that the trip was not discussed beforehand with the Secretariat of State, the pope's normal gatekeeper, where officials probably would have wanted to ponder the political and diplomatic fallout of such an expedition before signing off.

Fr. Stefano Nastasi, pastor of the local parish, was the one who initially invited Francis to come shortly after his election, reminding the new pope that he, too, is a "child of immigration."

"The tears that mark the faces of those rescued from the sea speak of sun and salt, of shivers of cold and of hunger," Nastasi wrote the pope back in March. "I would like to think that the tears of your eyes, which flowed at the moment of your election, could meet the tears of every man and woman suffering in the corners of the world."

Although Francis will release his first encyclical Friday, one could argue that his quick trip 48 hours later may actually represent the most powerful teaching moment of his young papacy.

[John L. Allen Jr. is *NCR* senior correspondent. His email address is jallen@ncronline.org. Follow him on Twitter: @JohnLAllenJr.]

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