

2012 papal trip to Mexico, Cuba being studied seriously, spokesman says

VATICAN CITY - Vatican officials are at an advanced stage in studying the possibility of a papal trip to Mexico and Cuba in the spring of 2012, the Vatican spokesman said.

Jesuit Father Federico Lombardi, the spokesman, told reporters Nov. 10 that the nuncios to Mexico and Cuba have been told to inform those governments that "the pope is studying a concrete plan to visit the two countries, responding to the invitations received" from them.

Father Lombardi said a definite decision regarding a trip in the spring should be made within a few weeks. The fact that the nuncios were asked to inform the governments demonstrates the advanced nature of the planning, he said.

The Mexican government and Mexican Catholics repeatedly have said they'd like Pope Benedict to visit "and he is happy to finally be able to respond," the Jesuit said. The pope went to Brazil in 2007, but would like to visit a Spanish-speaking country in the region and Mexico is the largest of them.

"Cuba is another country that really wants to see the pope," he said, and a papal visit could offer great encouragement to the people and the country "in an important period of their history."

Father Lombardi said the timing would be related to the 400th anniversary of the discovery of the image of Our Lady of Charity of Cobre, the patroness of Cuba.

"Just looking at a map, you see that Cuba and Mexico are in the same direction from Rome, so it's logical to combine in a single trip these two countries, rather than others that would require a longer and more complex itinerary," the spokesman said.

He excluded other countries being added to the trip and said that because of the altitude of Mexico City, it is unlikely the pope would visit the Mexican capital. "The best alternatives" will be studied immediately, he said.

With the Latin American bishops committed for the past four years to a program of new evangelization, he said, the papal trip to Mexico and Cuba would be a fitting way to prepare the entire church for the Year of Faith, scheduled to begin in October 2012.

At a news conference during the Mexican bishops' general meeting in Cuautitlan Izcalli Nov. 10, Archbishop Rogelio Cabrera Lopez of Tuxtla Gutierrez said a Vatican commission would arrive in Mexico in the "coming days" to study the conditions for a possible papal visit.

"The will of the Holy Father is clear ... to visit our country in the coming months," said Archbishop Cabrera, conference vice president.

The bishops, he said, expect the pope to visit much of the country. This would include regions suffering violence from organized crime and also at least one place Blessed John Paul II was unable to visit during his five trips to Mexico.

He said he expected the pope to visit despite any possible controversies it would cause during the campaign for July 1 federal elections.

A visit by Pope Benedict next year would come as Mexico and the Vatican mark the 20th anniversary of the two states establishing diplomatic relations, which ended nearly 150 years of strained relations. Those relations have evolved to the point that a possible visit during an electoral period would probably draw less criticism than during past years: Mexican politicians regularly meet with senior clergy, and the leaders of the bishops' conference met with Mexican President Felipe Calderon on the eve of their latest assembly.