

Pope's schedule reveals priorities

By Christopher Guntz

The itinerary for Pope Francis' first apostolic journey to the United States says a lot about who he is and the way he wants to influence people.

First of all, it's an apostolic journey. He is coming as the successor to the apostles and as a pastoral leader. That is his first and foremost reason for the journey.

There is no denying that he is also a world leader. He will meet with important, influential people, such as President Barrack Obama. He will speak to a joint meeting of the U.S. Congress and to the United Nations General Assembly. In these opportunities, Francis will likely speak about issues that have already come up in his papacy: concern for the poor and the vulnerable, the environment and immigrants.

Notably, he will arrive in the United States from Cuba. The pope is known to have been an important conduit for the U.S. and Cuba to resolve some differences and make diplomatic headway that has not been seen between the two countries in decades.

On the other hand, Francis will meet on a number of occasions with people who have little influence and who are considered unimportant to many of us. He will visit a Catholic Charities center in Washington, D.C., and a school in East Harlem, N.Y. He will spend the better part of his weekend focusing on family life and celebrating the Eucharist in Philadelphia.

The theme for the pope's U.S. visit tells the story: "Love is Our Mission." Just months before the beginning of the Special Jubilee Year of Mercy, we can expect Francis to share the Lord's mercy with those who will listen to him.

In Ecuador July 6, the pope stopped to pray at the modern National Shrine of Divine Mercy in Guayaquil. After praying, he greeted the sick and elderly present:

"Now I will celebrate Mass, and I hold you all in my heart. I will ask for each one of you, I will say to the Lord, 'You know the names of those who were there.' I will ask

Jesus for great mercy for every one of you; I will ask him to care for you and to cover you with his mercy.”

Everywhere the pope goes, he makes room for the “unimportant.” By doing so, he tells us these “least of my brothers and sisters” are important to him and very important in the eyes of the Lord. He reminds us of how generous God is with his love and mercy, pouring them over us freely.

When the pope travels, as he did in South America this week and as he will do in Cuba and the U.S. later this year, he is doing the Lord’s work. Can we say the same of our travels?

As you take time away this summer, whether down the ocean or across the country, will you continue to do the Lord’s work? Will you find time and a place to attend Mass on Sunday? As you see the important people and places, such as monuments and landmarks, will you also make time to stop and meet the people of the place you visit? They may be vendors, shopkeepers, ice-cream servers or waitresses. Will you engage these people and acknowledge their dignity, or are they only there to serve you?

Will you spend time with family, and put aside the smartphone or the tablet for a while so you can relax and engage with your loved ones? Will you schedule your summer so tightly that you never have time to breathe the fresh ocean air?

Just as the pope’s itinerary reveals his priorities, your travel plans reveal yours.

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