
Pope in Slovakia. Archbishop Zvolensky: “This visit is an immense spiritual gift for all of us to serve marginalised persons”

A Church that “trains people in interior freedom and responsibility, one able to be creative by plunging into their history and culture, capable of engaging in dialogue with the world“ is the image of the Christian community outlined and hoped for by Pope Francis for the Slovak Church. After Monday's address in St Martin's Cathedral and several other meetings and visits, the apostolic journey continues today in Slovakia's cities of Košice and Prešov. SIR interviewed the Archbishop of Bratislava, **Stanislav Zvolenský**, president of the Slovak Bishops' Conference, on the significance of Pope Bergoglio's visit. **Almost two decades have passed since a Pontiff last visited Slovakia. What are the expectations and desires associated with the visit of Pope Francis?** It's an immense spiritual gift for us all. Every visit of the Holy Father is an extraordinary event for believers. We are looking forward to meeting him as we know that the successor of Saint Peter will bring us strengthening in the faith, guidance and encouragement at a particularly difficult time of both physical and spiritual suffering that the whole world has been experiencing. **The planned visit to the Roma residential area in Košice will undoubtedly be an exceptional part of the apostolic journey. How does the Church in Slovakia see the situation of marginalized groups: the Roma, the homeless, poor people or senior citizens? What solutions does she provide in the area of pastoral care or practical support?** First of all, marginalized groups of people represent a daily opportunity for all of us to live the Gospel in a concrete way according to our capabilities. *We have special pastoral programs for Roma or homeless people, as well as for seniors, naturally.* But it is certain that the presence of the Holy Father, his words and personal example will bring a new motivation in this area, a renewed thrust to serve persons who are marginalised by society. **On September 15 Pope Francis will celebrate the feast of Our Lady of Seven Sorrows, Patron Saint of the country. His visit will therefore have a strong Marian dimension. Slovaks like to describe themselves as a Marian nation... what is your pastoral experience to this effect? What do Catholics expect from the visit of the Holy Father in this regard?** It is a great gift that his visit will culminate with the celebration of Holy Mass in our national Marian shrine in Šaštín. The time of the pandemic has been a time of physical and spiritual suffering, we had to face the reality of death. *On the other side there is Our Lady of Seven Sorrows, the icon of faith, hope and love that offers shelter in our encounter with suffering and death.* We are very much looking forward to his example as pilgrim who prays and asks for the intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary, and his testimony of hope, rooted in his Marian devotion. **The Holy Father's visit comes at a difficult time. The Covid-19 pandemic is far from over... To what extent will this fact influence the desire and possibility of Slovaks to meet the Pope personally? What are your words of encouragement for believers?** Competent authorities of the Slovak Republic have adopted all health-related measures in accordance with general regulations on public gatherings. Of course, these do have an impact on the organisation of meetings with the Holy Father. It is certain that they will influence the possibility of participation of many faithful. However, it's essential for all of us to be open to the words of the Holy Father and accept his message, regardless whether we will be able to meet him in person or just follow the events through the media. The openness of our hearts and the willingness to bear witness to and spread the joy of the Gospel will be crucial.

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