

Pope Francis in Cyprus. Fr Kraj (Patriarchal Vicar): "7,000 will attend Mass at the stadium. Possible transfer of 50 migrants"

"Anticipation is growing into joy for the forthcoming arrival of Pope Francis. All local communities are busy finalising preparations." Franciscan Father **Jerzy Kraj**, Patriarchal Vicar for Cyprus, describes to SIR the final hours leading up to the arrival of Pope Francis on the largest island in the Mediterranean Sea, scheduled for the early afternoon of tomorrow December 2 (until the 4th).



The busy agenda of institutional and pastoral meetings of the papal visit will culminate with Holy Mass at the GSP Stadium in Nicosia on the morning of Friday, December 3. The courtesy visit to Chrysostomos II, Orthodox Archbishop of Cyprus, and the ecumenical prayer with migrants in the Franciscan parish Church of the Holy Cross in Nicosia, the last event before departure for Greece on Saturday 4, are highly anticipated. **Holy Mass and ecumenical prayer.** The Patriarchal Vicar says he was "amazed by the overwhelming request for participation in the Mass at the Nicosia stadium. All the tickets have been sold out. We were expecting about 4-5,000 faithful, but the number has reached almost 7,000, with even the upper section of the stands being taken up. The Holy Mass will be attended not only by Latin and Maronite Catholics, but also by Orthodox and Anglicans." He goes on to announce: "We received requests from the government for about 700 tickets. We are very pleased about this because most government officials are known to be Orthodox Christians. There will be a small delegation of believers from the Turkish part of the island, including some Italians who work in that area. Not many will be there because African students in particular, who attend universities in the north, are not allowed to cross the border into the Greek area of the island." **A 100-year-old bottle.** The closeness of the local faithful to the Pope is also reflected in the great number of gifts they wish to offer him. "One woman reportedly brought a 100-year-old bottle of wine to the nunciature as a gift for Pope Francis. It's a characteristic raisin wine made in the Commandaria region of Cyprus on the foothills of the Troödos mountains. Others plan to donate fruit baskets and typical products from the island," adds Father Kraj. Patriarch Pizzaballa will present the Pope with an icon of St Barnabas, patron saint of the visit.



While the final preparations are underway, the Patriarchal Vicar further highlights the significance of this visit: "It will also be a meaningful sign of ecumenical dialogue."

The Pope is coming to comfort this land and the small flock that inhabits it.

Dialogue on the island thrives on many concrete gestures - suffice it to say that four of a total of seven churches where we hold our celebrations belong to the Orthodox Church. The visit will be an occasion for the whole community on the island to courageously resume its journey and its identity -

in keeping with the motto of the papal visit, 'Comforting each other in faith.'" *"Pope Francis is coming to listen to our sorrows, our anxieties, as well as our hopes," he said.* Father Kraj said he is "certain to find this atmosphere of hope and openness in the ecumenical prayer with migrants at the Franciscan parish Church of the Holy Cross in Nicosia, the last event before leaving Larnaca on Saturday the 4th, headed to Greece. The prayer with migrants and refugees will reflect the spirit of openness and welcome that the Pope constantly urges us to offer to those most in need. The fact that the invitation comes from Cyprus, an island that is still divided, a small corner of the Holy Land (Cyprus is under the Jurisdiction of the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem, *ed.'s note*), closer to Europe, gives greater topical relevance to this message." Cyprus, Father Kraj reiterates, "is on the periphery of Europe, an existential periphery that bears the suffering of migrants, asylum seekers and people who arrived here over the last few years from poverty-stricken and war zones such as Africa, Lebanon, Syria, Palestine...". *"The Pope exhorts us to go to the peripheries, like good Samaritans. Pursuing this direction is now a necessary challenge for us. We must not close our eyes, especially here in Cyprus."* **50 migrants, an "option being explored"**. On the subject of migrants, the Franciscan Father confirms what has been said by the director of the Vatican Press Office, Matteo Bruni, regarding the possibility that Pope Francis could bring a group of refugees to Italy - as occurred on the Greek island of Lesbos in April 2016. "This option is being explored - says the vicar - the Community of Sant'Egidio is working on it. The government has reportedly indicated fifty migrants whose status is now under review by national authorities. We have to wait for the conclusion of the bureaucratic process. In any event, they would not be boarded on the papal flight. In the meantime, twelve of them will participate in the ecumenical prayer with migrant people in the Franciscan parish church of the Holy Cross in Nicosia."

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