

Pope to meet refugees, poor during visit to Bulgaria, North Macedonia

VATICAN CITY (CNS) – Pope Francis will take part in several interreligious events as well as a visit to a refugee camp and a meeting with the poor in St. Teresa of Kolkata's hometown during a three-day visit to the Balkans.

The pope is scheduled to travel to Bulgaria May 5-7 and North Macedonia May 7.

During his visit, the pope will also celebrate the first Communion of a group of children in Rakovski – the city with the largest number of Catholics in Bulgaria, which is predominately Orthodox. Catholics make up less than 1 percent of Bulgaria's more than 7 million people.

The visit includes meetings with government authorities as well as Orthodox and other religious leaders. He will also participate in an ecumenical prayer service in Bulgaria's capital, Sofia.

The Republic of North Macedonia is about 64 percent Orthodox, 33 percent Muslim and less than half of 1 percent are Catholic or belong to other Christian denominations.

Pope Francis will make history as the first pope to visit North Macedonia, which declared independence from the former Yugoslavia in 1991.

On the final day of his trip, the pope will meet with poor people in the Macedonian capital, Skopje, which is the birthplace of St. Teresa of Kolkata.

The motto for the trip to Bulgaria is "Pacem in Terris" (Peace on Earth), the title of a 1963 encyclical by St. John XXIII,

who served in Bulgaria 1925-35 as a Vatican diplomat, and the prayer for peace Pope Francis will make during the trip, the Vatican said.

“Do not be afraid any longer, little flock” from Luke 12:32 was chosen as the theme for the visit to North Macedonia. The logo for the trip features red and gold, the colors of the nation’s flag, and three blue stripes bordering the bottom to echo the blue stripes of Mother Teresa’s white sari.

The Vatican released the following schedule March 7, leaving out the exact times for many events. Times listed are local, with Eastern Daylight Time in parentheses.

Sunday, May 5 (Rome, Sofia)

- 7 a.m. (1 a.m.) Departure from Rome’s Fiumicino airport for Sofia.
- 10 a.m. (3 a.m.) Arrival at Sofia international airport.
- Meeting with Bulgarian Prime Minister Boyko Borissov at the airport governmental lounge.
- Welcoming ceremony on the square outside the presidential palace.
- Courtesy visit with President Rumen Radev in the presidential palace.
- Meeting with government authorities, civic leaders and the diplomatic corps at Atanas Burov Square. Speech by pope.
- Visit with Bulgarian Orthodox Patriarch Neophyte and members of the Holy Synod at the Palace of the Holy Synod. Greeting by pope.
- Private prayer before the Throne of Sts. Cyril and Methodius at the Patriarchal Cathedral of St. Alexander Nevsky.
- Recitation of the Regina Coeli prayer in St. Alexander

Nevsky Square.

– 4:45 p.m. (9:45 a.m.) Celebration of Mass at Knyaz Alexander I Square. Homily by pope.

Monday, May 6 (Sofia, Rakovski, Sofia)

– Visit to refugee camp

– 9:30 a.m. (2:30 a.m.) Departure by plane to Rakovski.

– Celebration of Mass with first Communion at the Church of the Sacred Heart. Homily by pope.

– Lunch with bishops of Bulgaria at the Convent of the Franciscan Sisters.

– Meeting with the Catholic community at the Church of St. Michael the Archangel. Speech by pope.

5:15 p.m. (10:15 a.m.) Departure by plane for Sofia.

– Prayer for peace with Bulgarian representatives of various religious faiths at Nezavisimost Square. Prayer by pope.

Tuesday, May 7 (Sofia, Skopje, Rome)

– Farewell ceremony at Sofia international airport.

– 8:20 a.m. (1:20 a.m.) Departure from Sofia international airport for Skopje.

– 8:15 a.m. (2:15 a.m.) Arrival at Skopje international airport.

– Welcoming ceremony in the courtyard of the Presidential Palace.

– Courtesy visit with President Gjorge Ivanov of North Macedonia at the Presidential Palace.

– Meeting with Prime Minister Zoran Zaev at the presidential

palace.

- Meeting with government authorities, civic leaders and the diplomatic corps in the Mosaic Hall of the presidential palace. Speech by pope.
- Visit to the Mother Teresa Memorial with religious leaders and meeting with the poor. Prayer by pope.
- Celebration of Mass at Macedonia Square. Homily by pope.
- Lunch with papal entourage.
- Ecumenical and interreligious meeting with young people at pastoral center. Speech by pope.
- Meeting with priests, religious men and women and their families at the cathedral of Skopje. Speech by pope.
- Farewell ceremony at the Skopje international airport.
- 6:30 p.m. (12:30 p.m.) Departure for Rome.
- 8:30 p.m. (2:30 p.m.) Arrival at Rome's Ciampino airport.