

Pope Francis' history-making South American excursion

By **Daniel Burke**, CNN Religion Editor

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Photos: Pope Francis tours South America

Pope Francis waves during a meeting with young people at the "Costanera" in Asuncion, Paraguay, on Sunday, July 12, the final day of his eight-day tour of South America.

1 of 37

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Story highlights

Pope Francis returning to Rome after a momentous visit to his native South America

His words on behalf of the poor and the environment has reverberated throughout the world

(CNN) — He chatted with presidents and [prisoners](#), visited a [muddy slum](#) and magnificent shrines, praised the simple piety of children and excoriated greedy capitalists.

On Sunday night, as Pope Francis finally flies home to Rome, he leaves South America's "[forgotten countries](#)" with moments that many will likely never forget.

He took dozens of selfies, shook hundreds of hands and celebrated Mass before millions.



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world's economic system.

He apologized for the church's "grave sins" during colonialism and is likely the first pontiff to pray in Guarani, an indigenous South American language.

He remains remarkably popular, but he is not a superhero. He changed clothes in a Burger King, not a phone booth.

El papa Francisco sale del Burger King-Sacristía para decir su primera misa en Santa Cruz (Bolivia)
pic.twitter.com/QY9WBbBx67

— Pablo Ordaz (@pablo_ordaz) July 9, 2015

At times he looked weary of the spotlight and wary of the politicians angling for a papal endorsement.

But for the most part, the 78-year-old Argentine seemed energized by the people of Ecuador, Bolivia and Paraguay -- countries that haven't seen a pope on their soil in a generation.

Here are the most fascinating moments of Francis' eight-day excursion in South America:

The 'altar of money'

Pope Francis delivered a biting critique of contemporary capitalism on Saturday, saying the poor are often sacrificed on the "altar of money" and accusing the wealthy of worshipping a new "golden calf."

"Certainly every culture needs economic growth and the creation of wealth," the Pope told a group of civic leaders in Paraguay, the final stop of his weeklong trip to three South American countries.

But political and business leaders have a responsibility to ensure that some profits reach the pockets of the poor, he said.

"I ask them not to yield to an economic model which is idolatrous, which needs to sacrifice human lives on the altar of money and profit," Francis said.

The Pope also said he gets "snotty" when he hears highfalutin speeches from politicians that "everyone knows are liars." He compared corrupt regimes that convict political opponents on bogus charges to Hitler and Stalin.

And he said the worshipping of golden calves -- an ancient form of paganism -- has "returned in a new and ruthless guise in the idolatry of money."

Francis' fierce condemnations of economic inequality led some -- including leftist [Bolivian President Evo Morales](#) -- to say the Pope is preaching socialism.

But the Pope said Saturday that his concern for the poor comes from the heart of Christianity.

One more interesting note from Saturday's speech: Among the attendees was a gay rights activist. It was a bold move to invite [Simon Casal](#), as [CNN's Shasta Darlington reports](#).



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Pope Francis to meet with gay rights activist in Paraguay 01:56

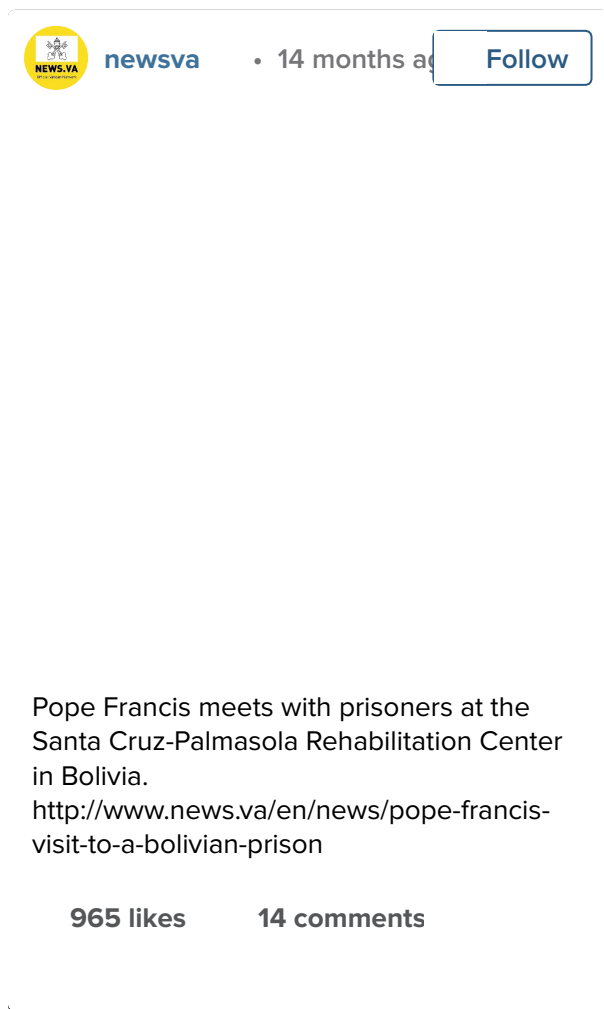
President and the prisoners

One of the key Catholic phrases describing the Pope's mission and manner is "[a culture of encounter](#)."

That's a fancy way of saying that he tries to meet people where they're at -- and there's no better example than visiting a prison.

On Friday morning, the Pope went to Santa Cruz-Palmasola, the largest and most notorious prison in Bolivia. The men's facility, where the Pope met prisoners and their families, holds about 2,800 inmates.

"I could not leave Bolivia without seeing you," Francis told the prisoners, earning a hearty cheer.



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Pope Francis meets with prisoners at the Santa Cruz-Palmasola Rehabilitation Center in Bolivia.
<http://www.news.va/en/news/pope-francis-visit-to-a-bolivian-prison>

965 likes 14 comments

Francis called for some reforms, including access to education and easing overcrowding. But perhaps the most poignant moment occurred when the Pope got personal.

"The man standing before you is a man who has been forgiven," the pontiff said. "A man who was, and is, saved from his many sins."

It was another side of Francis showing forth: the humble pastor who looks for lost sheep, not the fiery prophet who denounces the pursuit of money as "the devil's dung."

One of the most interesting aspects of the Pope's prison visit was [his body language](#).

He was leaning forward, attentive, making eye contact with the three prisoners who shared the stage with him and delivered short speeches. It was a contrast from Thursday night, when Francis appeared to be a bit wearied by Bolivian President Evo Morales' very long speech.

I don't want to read too much into this -- Morales' speech was at the end of a long day for Francis. But it's worth noting the difference, which you can see in the video below.



Pope Francis visits President, prisoners in Bolivia 01:14

The Pope apologizes

Pope Francis apologized for the "many grave sins" committed by Christians against indigenous peoples in South America during the colonization of the continent by Spain several centuries ago.

In a speech largely dedicated to [decrying a "new colonialism,"](#) in which corporations and banks take the place of colonizing nation-states, the Pope acknowledged Thursday that the Catholic Church's history is not entirely free from transgression.

"I say this to you with regret," Francis said during a speech to grassroots movements in Santa Cruz, Bolivia. "Many grave sins were committed against the native peoples of America in the name of God."

As the Pope noted, his predecessors, including St. John Paul II, had acknowledged the church's soiled history in South America.

[#PopeFrancis](#) has landed in Paraguay. Last stop on South America trip. pic.twitter.com/QCYDeDbv/

— Cindy Wooden (@Cindy_Wooden) [July 10, 2015](#)

Francis' apology goes further than previous pontiffs, said Andrew Chesnut, a scholar of Catholicism and Latin America at Virginia Commonwealth University.

"Pope Francis' apology, the fullest ever, is the most significant aspect of his trip thus far."

Chesnut added that it will be interesting to see whether Francis also apologizes when he visits Cuba in September. The Jesuits were the "largest corporate slaveholders in Brazil," where they imported slaves from the Caribbean, the scholar said.

Francis made a point of reaching out to native peoples during his trip.

Masses have featured chants and readings in [local languages such as Guarani](#), and in Ecuador he urged President Rafael Correa [not to drill for oil in the Amazonian rainforest](#), the ancestral homeland of Native South Americans.

The Pope's approach seems to have earned him at least one prominent fan.

"For the first time, I feel like I have a pope: Pope Francis," said Bolivia's Evo Morales, who claims to have indigenous ancestry.

The 'devil's dung'

Pope Francis delivered a fiery denunciation of modern capitalism tonight <http://t.co/AC5Xk90aAP>
pic.twitter.com/zyyaCs6jNV

— Daniel Burke (@BurkeCNN) July 10, 2015

The Pope delivered a sharp condemnation of modern capitalism on Thursday night, calling the "unfettered pursuit of money" the "dung of the devil" and accusing world leaders of "cowardice" for refusing to defend the Earth from exploitation.

Speaking to grassroots organizers in Bolivia, the Pope urged the poor and disenfranchised to rise up against "new colonialism," including corporations, loan agencies, free trade treaties, austerity measures and "the monopolizing of the communications media."

The speech was pretty long, as even the Pope admitted:

[#PopeFrancis](#) asks the crowd, "Is the priest talking too much?" pic.twitter.com/ED0jRXNMpc

— Catholic News Svc (@CatholicNewsSvc) July 9, 2015

Here are the 3 most pungent quotes from the Pope's speech:

1. "And behind all this pain, death and destruction there is the stench of what Basil of Caesarea, one of the church's first theologians, called 'the dung of the devil.' An unfettered pursuit of money rules. That is the dung of the devil."
2. "Working for a just distribution of the fruits of the earth and human labor is not mere philanthropy. It is a moral obligation. For Christians, the responsibility is even greater: it is a commandment."
3. "Our common home is being pillaged, laid waste and harmed with impunity. Cowardice in defending it is a grave sin. We see with growing disappointment how one international summit after another takes place without any significant result."

Pope Francis also called the recent persecution of Christians a "genocide."

[Read a Catholic priest's take on the Pope's "revolutionary" speech](#)

A Communist crucifix

The look on the Pope's face said it all.

On Wednesday evening in Bolivia, Morales presented Francis with wooden crucifix laid atop a hammer and sickle, the communist symbol conceived during the Russian Revolution.



Bolivian President Evo Morales presents Pope Francis with a gift of a crucifix carved into a wooden hammer and sickle, the communist symbol uniting labor and peasants in La Paz, Bolivia, on July 8.

The links and battles between communism and the Catholic Church are an extremely sensitive subject in Latin America, the Pope's home continent. While he was an archbishop in Argentina, Francis tried to strike a delicate balance between championing the poor and avoiding class warfare.

[According to reports](#), Morales told Francis that the "communist crucifix" was modeled on a design created by the Rev. Luis Espinal, a politically active priest murdered in Bolivia in 1980. (The Pope stopped and prayed at the site of the shooting on Wednesday evening.)

It's unclear whether the Pope told Morales, "That's not right," or simply said: "I didn't know that."

In any case, Vatican spokesman Rev. Federico Lombardi had the final word:

"Certainly," [he told reporters](#), "it will not be put in a church."

The Vatican originally said that Pope Francis [left the controversial crucifix](#) in Bolivia. But the Pope later said that he brought it back to Rome.

Francis gets the nun's rush

A visibly winded Pope Francis landed in La Paz, Bolivia -- one of the world's highest capitals -- on Wednesday.

Vatican officials say the Pope did not chew coca leaves, as had been widely discussed. But [he did drink coca tea](#), another South American remedy for altitude sickness, on the plane ride from Ecuador to Bolivia.

For all the concern about altitude sickness, though, a Catholic nun might have given Francis his most surprising moment when she rushed toward him at La Paz Cathedral.

The Pope quickly recovered, and gave the nuns a blessing, as you can see in the video below.

A nun rushed Pope Francis like a rock star at a cathedral in La Paz, Bolivia. Full story:

<http://t.co/QNZ5JrdeL3> <https://t.co/o8PjX4DZ90>

— CNN Video (@CNNVideo) July 9, 2015

A papal pep talk

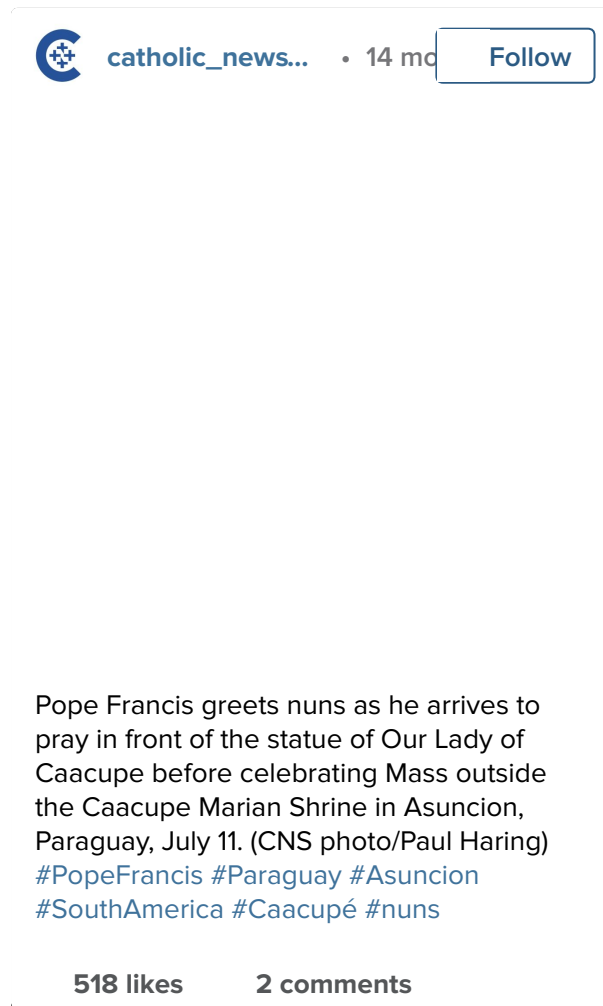
Addressing priests and nuns in Ecuador on Wednesday, the Pope said he had prepared a speech -- but didn't want to deliver it.

Instead, the pontiff spoke spontaneously for about 30 minutes, in a speech that showcased his sprightly sense of humor.

He teased nuns who would rather watch soap operas than care for the needy. He joked that he doesn't remember quotes and Bible passages as well as he once did. And he warned priests, and bishops for that matter, not to fall prey to "spiritual Alzheimer's," a punchy phrase he has used quite often in the past few years.

The word that Francis kept coming back to is "gratuidad," mentioning it at least a dozen times during the papal pep talk. Translated into English the word is somewhat clunky: gratuitousness.

I asked a translator I've been working with a little more about "gratuidad." Is it common word in Spanish, I wondered?



It's not, said Richard Singer, the translator, and I could see that he had circled it in the Pope's prepared remarks. Singer said that he had wanted to look it up.

Literally, it means "something freely given," sort of like a "gratuity."

But unlike a tip for a waiter, "gratuidad" means not only a gift, but also one that's not necessarily deserved.

That fit with a big theme of the Pope's message to nuns and priests: Remember your roots, and don't think you're special just because you've received a calling from God.

"You did not buy a ticket to get into the seminary," he told them. "You did nothing to 'deserve' it."

Embracing the elderly, talking selfies with the young

As Pope Francis continued his trip through South America, it's clear that he wanted to particularly embrace three groups of people: the young, the sick and the elderly.

As you can see in this video from Tuesday in Ecuador, that embrace is quite literal.



Woman in wheelchair carried to meet Pope 00:44

Mr. President, don't drill in that rainforest

The Pope took his eco-friendly message to the masses on Tuesday in Ecuador, calling for a new system of global justice based on human rights and care for the environment rather than economic profits.

"The goods of the Earth are meant for everyone," the Pope said, "and however much someone may parade his property, it has a social mortgage."

Francis' call for environmental protection, a prevalent theme in his papacy, came on the second full day of his weeklong tour of South America.



Photos: Pope Francis tours South America

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1 of 37

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In recent months, indigenous groups have protested Correa, saying that his promotion of drilling and mining near the Amazon rainforest could ruin their ancestral homeland.

The Pope left little doubt about whose side he takes.

"The tapping of natural resources, which are so abundant in Ecuador, must not be concerned with short-term benefits," Francis said.

It was interesting to see the Pope speak so specifically about his host country's environmental policies. An apt analogy might be Francis coming out against the Keystone Pipeline when he addresses the U.S. Congress this September.

A real education

In an impassioned speech at Catholic university in Ecuador, the Pope urged students to "make a fuss" and told teachers not to "play the professor."

"As a university, as educational institutions, as teachers and students, life itself challenges us to answer this question: What does the world need us for? Where is your brother?"

Like a teacher underlining an important point -- Francis taught high school and was rector of a college in Argentina -- the Pope raised his voice and pumped his arms.

He told students, who cheered at the mention of their name, a good education should encourage greater responsibility to the needs of the poor and concern for the environment.

[3 ways Pope Francis is shaking up the church: Politics, places and people](#)



Massive crowds gather for Pope's Mass 02:06

'Scandalous' changes?

At a Mass on Monday in Ecuador, the Pope focused his sermon on the family and hinted that [changes that some Catholics might consider "scandalous"](#) could be coming to the church.

Most likely, he was referring to how the church ministers to divorced Catholics and LGBT families.

After the Mass, the Pope met an old friend and had [lunch with the Jesuit community](#). (Francis is the first Jesuit pope.) He also took many, many selfies throughout the day and shook many, many hands.

It's clear that Ecuadorians were elated about seeing the first Latin American Pope's on his first trip to Spanish-speaking countries. [This gallery of papal memorabilia](#) conveys some of the essence.



Photos: Pope memorabilia in South America

A street vendor sells cutout images of Pope Francis near the airport in El Alto, Bolivia, on Wednesday. Memorabilia is being sold across South America to commemorate [the Pope's eight-day tour](#) of Ecuador, Bolivia and Paraguay.

1 of 9

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Late Monday night, the Pope said goodnight and went to bed. Except the crowd wouldn't let him, singing and praying outside the Vatican Embassy, where he's stayed in Quito.

Finally, the Pope came out, [gave the crowd a quick blessing](#) and then firmly told them to go home and let the neighbors get some rest.

For the third night in a row, [#PopeFrancis](#) goes out to say a personal goodnight to crowd outside nunciature pic.twitter.com/wJFeGgap5o

— Cindy Wooden (@Cindy_Wooden) [July 8, 2015](#)