

Pope Presses Message To Cuba: Be Willing To Change

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Associated Press

SANTIAGO, Cuba — Pope Francis marked the anniversary Monday of the day he decided as a teenager to become a priest by pressing a subtle message to Cubans at a delicate point in their own history: Overcome ideological preconceptions and be willing to change.

Francis traveled to Cuba's fourth-largest city, Holguin, and celebrated a Mass where Cuban rhythms mixed with church hymns under a scorching tropical sun.

Later in the day, he flew to Santiago for an evening visit to the shrine of Cuba's patron saint, and on Tuesday he will arrive in Washington for the U.S. leg of his visit to the two former Cold War enemies.

Singing children and a small crowd waving Cuban and Vatican flags greeted Francis on his arrival, some crying out, "Francis! Holguin is with you!" Holguin's Plaza of the Revolution was packed with an estimated 150,000 people for the Mass, many dressed in white to protect them from the sun.

Security agents didn't appear to be letting members of the crowd get close to him. On Sunday, an apparent dissident hung on to the popemobile in Havana and seemed to be appealing to the pontiff before the man was dragged away.

In his homily in Holguin, a city of about 300,000, Francis pressed some of the subtle themes he has developed during this balancing act of a Cuban visit. He told the crowd of how Jesus picked a lowly and despised tax collector, Matthew, and instructed him without casting judgment to follow him. That act of mercy changed Matthew forever.

Francis told the Cubans that they, too, should allow themselves "to slowly overcome our preconceptions and our reluctance to think that others, much less ourselves, can change."

"Do you believe it is possible that a tax collector can be a servant?" he asked on Day Three of his visit to the island. "Do you believe it is possible that a traitor can become a friend?"

It was a theme Francis sketched out Sunday night in an off-the-cuff encounter with young people. He encouraged them to dream big about what their life could be like, and not be "boxed in" by ideologies or preconceptions about others.

"If you are different than me, why don't we talk?" Francis asked the crowd. "Why do we always throw rocks at that which separates us?"

The message comes at a delicate moment of change on the island. Cuba and the U.S. re-established diplomatic relations this year in a move Francis helped broker, and the communist country is undertaking modest free-market reforms that have opened some sectors of the economy to private enterprise.

Detente with the United States has raised hopes on both sides of the Florida Straits that the millions of families divided by the 1959 Cuban revolution will be reunited.

As a result, Francis has emphasized themes of reconciliation and looking beyond prejudice and ideologies.

"Francis is looking for peace among peoples and countries," said Yordani Monteagudo, a 24-year-old government worker who recorded Francis' encounter with young people Sunday night and was still talking about it a day later. "In his message he called on young people to not be afraid to dream. This makes you want to live, and build up this country."

Francis' homily also reflected a very personal story of his own faith and willingness to embrace change.

On Sept. 21, 1953 — 62 years ago Monday — a 17-year-old Jorge Mario Bergoglio went to confession at his parish church in Buenos Aires. During the confession, he later wrote, he "realized God was waiting for me," and knew he was going to become a priest.

Bergoglio wouldn't enter the seminary for several more years, but Sept. 21 — the feast of St. Matthew — has remained a crucial reference point for the pope.

"This Gospel of St. Matthew, this experience of Jesus who looks him in the eye and calls him to conversion to follow him, is something that is absolutely fundamental to the spirituality and life of the pope," said the Vatican spokesman, the Rev. Federico Lombardi. "It is something that is at the root of Bergoglio's religious vocation."

After arriving in Santiago, the pope went to the Sanctu-



AL DIAZ/MIAMI HERALD/TNS
Pope Francis arrives to deliver Mass at the Plaza de la Revolucion in Havana, Cuba, on Sunday, Sept. 20.

ary of the Virgin of Charity of Cobre, the home of the venerated icon of Cuba's patron saint. After laying a bouquet at the feet of the foot-tall wooden statue, Francis made the sign of the cross and prayed, sitting and silent, for about 10 minutes. He then stood and recited a prayer.

The head of the Cuban opposition group Ladies in White said 22 of 24 members

who wanted to attend Francis' Mass in Havana on Sunday were prevented from going by Cuban security agents. And two well-known Cuban dissidents said agents detained them after the Vatican invited them to the pope's vespers service at Havana's cathedral.

Lombardi confirmed that some dissidents were invited to events to receive a greeting from the pope, but he said

he didn't know why it didn't come to pass.

Asked if the Holy See would lodge an official protest, Lombardi demurred. He stressed that what was planned was just a "passing greeting," not an official meeting, and that it was set up at the last minute out of a "desire to show an attention for everyone, including dissidents."

VW Stock Tanks Amid Federal Probe

BERLIN (AP) — Volkswagen, the world's top-selling automaker, lost a stunning 17.1 percent of its value Monday after admitting that it intentionally rigged nearly half a million cars to defeat U.S. smog tests.

The Obama administration, meanwhile, announced it is expanding its investigation of what it's calling "defeat devices" in diesel vehicles, to make sure other manufacturers aren't using similar schemes to thwart federal Clean Air laws.

Volkswagen has now admitted that it intentionally installed software programmed to switch engines to a cleaner mode during official emissions testing. The software then switches off again, enabling cars to drive more powerfully on the road while emitting as much as 40 times the legal pollution limit.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency is working closely with the California Air Resources Board, which spent years pressing Volkswagen to explain why its diesel engines ran dirtier in actual driving than during smog tests.

"VW did not self-disclose these issues," said EPA spokeswoman Liz Purchia said.

Balkan Officials Trade Accusations

BELGRADE, Serbia (AP) — The war of words over Europe's migrant crisis is turning vicious, with officials in the bickering Balkans trading blame and accusations of lying, while also disparaging each other's actions as "pathetic" and a "disgrace."

The plight over how to deal with thousands of asylum seekers is reviving old differences among Serbia, Croatia, Macedonia and Slovenia dating back to the 1990s breakup of Yugoslavia. It's also creating some new tensions.

While the 28-nation European Union remains deeply divided over how to share the burden of relocating the refugees and is convening a series of meetings this week to seek a resolution, the finger-pointing turned especially nasty in the Balkans.

Hungary's decision Sept. 15 to close its border with Serbia has diverted the waves of people from the Middle East, Africa and Asia to Croatia.

At first, Croatia welcomed them, thinking they would simply go to Slovenia and continue on to Austria and Germany. But Slovenia shut its border, and Croatia quickly found itself overwhelmed with about 30,000 people in a matter of days.

Life Of Baby Doe Was Marked By Abuse

BOSTON (AP) — In her short, tumultuous life, Bella Bond loved cats, dancing to country music and the color green.

Those were but brief flashes of happiness in a life marked by neglect, abuse and a horrible ending, according to descriptions given by a prosecutor in court Monday, as Bella's mother and her boyfriend were arraigned on charges in connection with her death.



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