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Pope Francis Returns to Asia-Pacific Frontlines

Francis' longest trip yet will touch on some fraught geopolitical issues.

By **Michel Chambon**

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From September 2 to 13, Pope Francis will be [back in the Asia-Pacific](#) for a journey that will break several records of his papacy.

Visiting four countries in 12 days, the Argentinian Pontiff is embarking on the longest trip since he acceded to the throne of St. Peter in 2013. Flying more than 28,000 kilometers, Francis will visit the country with the largest Muslim population (Indonesia), the linguistically most diverse society (Papua New Guinea), the nation with [the highest percentage of Catholics](#) (Timor-Leste) and the [religiously most diverse country](#) (Singapore).

At each stop, Francis will meet with local authorities, religious leaders, marginalized populations, Catholic communities, and representatives from civil society. The pope, 87 years old and relentless, is expected to engage with issues related to socioeconomic development, interreligious relations, and regional integration, but also the overall role of Catholicism in the Asia-Pacific region.

However, after his recent [visits to Mongolia](#) (2023), [Kazakhstan](#) (2022), and Thailand (2019) many wonder why Francis has decided to return to Asia while postponing other invitations, including a much-awaited visit to his home country, Argentina. Why is the Far East so important for the Vatican? Why has the Holy See decided to combine these four countries into a single trip? Are there any particular regional features that Francis wants to touch upon?

One Region, Two Global Dynamics

Looking at the exact location of each papal stop and at their specific order, it appears that Francis will circulate around a set of large islands, the Greater Maluku region, and probably put his finger on the tensions and torments of this archipelago.



A map of the Greater Maluku Region. ID [326991520](#) © [Taras Vykhopen](#) | [Dreamstime.com](#)

As the spice islands have long illustrated, this region has extremely rich mineral, agricultural, and marine resources as well as socio-cultural traditions. The Greater Maluku region is one of the most biodiverse regions on the planet. And for centuries, the archipelago was an important center for transnational trade. It was these islands that attracted European empires into Asia.

For a Jesuit like Pope Francis, this region belongs to the roots of his order. It was there

that in the mid-16th century, Francis Xavier, the co-founder of the Jesuits, evangelized local people with great success. The famous miracle of the crab – which is said to have been holding in its claws the same crucifix Francis Xavier had thrown into the stormy sea as a call for God’s help and which became a key symbol to represent the saint – occurred in Maluku.

Today, the Greater Maluku region is divided between eastern Indonesia, the southern Philippines, Timor-Leste, and Papua New Guinea. While it is marginalized by more powerful nation-states and trade routes, it is also a battlefield for the extraction of natural resources. As poverty and [recurring violence in West Papua](#) illustrate too dramatically, there is no agreement about who has the rights to extract and profit from regional resources.

On the islands of Ambon, Maluku, Flores, and Papua, tensions between Christian and Muslim communities remain omnipresent. They intersect with ethnic divisions and economic predation. Java-centric Indonesia, Australia, the United Kingdom, China, and Japan are all interested in what the region can offer. But the development benefits for Indigenous populations have not yet materialized.

In the heart of this region, the [Catholic Church played a pivotal role in helping Timor-Leste in its struggle for independence.](#)

During the 1980s-1990s, the local clergy asserted itself against Australian and Indonesian interests to enable a mechanism for East Timorese people to contest the military occupation of Indonesia and regain national independence in 2002.

In the Greater Maluku region, most of the population is Christian. And since recent history has shown, the Catholic Church is not a marginal actor without political leverage. Thus, the actions of Pope Francis will be carefully scrutinized.

Not surprisingly, Indonesian voices have already pressured Dili and Port Moresby to not let West Papuan pro-independence flags appear during events related to the papal visit. Different forces are competing for the international visibility and political credit that a pope can bring.

Francis will visit Jakarta first and then go to Papua New Guinea. In addition to a stop in Port Moresby, the nation's capital, the Argentinian Pontiff will push all the way to Vanimo – a small town in the north of Papua Island and at the border with Indonesia. There, the fraught question of West Papua's social unrest and independence movement will be difficult to avoid.

But the tensions of the Greater Maluku are not simply regional. There are overlapping regional and global dynamics at work across these islands. As the recent agreement between China and the Solomon Islands illustrated too well, the whole region is a frontline between the Western world and the Sino-centric one. By visiting Indonesia, Papua New Guinea, Timor-Leste, and Singapore, Francis is navigating between two global spheres of influence.

The geopolitical competition generates numerous frictions in the region and beyond. But as the Sino-Vatican agreement and [other examples of direct diplomatic cooperation](#) with China exemplify, the Holy See has deployed numerous efforts to neither take sides nor let [private interests weaponize Catholicism](#) for political purposes.

This includes efforts to counterbalance religious narratives and political agendas promoted by U.S. media – including the Catholic media. Francis remains firm on protecting the independence of the Church and the sovereignty of the Holy See. Catholicism shouldn't be used by some to reinforce their politico-economic hegemony. This global vision will permeate the whole Asia-Pacific trip.

Yet, despite the importance of these regional and global dynamics, all politics remain locally grounded. The four countries that Pope Francis is visiting certainly have their own internal dynamics and challenges. Thus, each stop will be steeped in a distinct local context with related pastoral messages.

Four Countries, Four National Realities

As is customary, Francis will pay courtesy visits to heads of state, local authorities, and religious leaders of each country. He will also join special events for young people and preside over a holy mass for local Catholics of each country. Topics such as climate change, education, and interreligious relations will remain as relevant threads throughout the whole trip.

In Indonesia, the key event will be on September 5, when Francis will join a highly visible interreligious meeting at the Istiqlal Mosque, the largest mosque in Southeast Asia. For years, the Vatican has built an active dialogue with Islamic leaders. With Muslim-Christian tensions and conflicts in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia, this interreligious effort remains a global priority that the stop in Indonesia will serve.

However, making the visit to Indonesia as a global statement about Muslim-Christian dialogue is not without risks and contradiction. If Indonesia hosts the largest

Muslim community of the world, its constitution protects the equal rights of six religions under the principle of Pancasila. Indonesia is not an Islamic state, and in several eastern provinces, Christians are the ruling majority.

By visiting Jakarta only and giving priority to dialogue with Islam, Indonesian Catholics and their rich diversity will be less visible. Economically marginalized Christians will be unable to come to Jakarta. Unlike with John Paul II in 1989 who visited five locations across the archipelago, Francis' visit will be framed through a Java-centric angle.

In Papua New Guinea, the dynamics will be entirely different. Despite the country's diverse array of Indigenous groups, Papuans are predominantly Christian. As the largest religious community, Catholics represent 26 percent of the population. Yet, this vast country with a relatively small population struggles with major questions such as the nation-building process and stable economic development. More than 85 percent of the population lives in a rural setting, often in customary communities.

As a member of the Commonwealth and a constitutional monarchy, Papua New Guinea continues to have the British King Charles III as its head of the state. Simultaneously, Australia stands as a powerful and

influential neighbor. It is the Royal Australian Air Force that might provide papal flights between Port Moresby and Vainimo.

During his meeting with young people in the Sir John Guise Stadium, Port Moresby, and his pastoral visit in the northern part of the country, Francis is expected to advocate for a more integral development. Echoing [*Laudato Si*](#), an essential document promulgated in 2015 to call for a more sustainable, ecologically responsible, and socially integrated development, Francis will most likely encourage efforts to fight predatory extraction of resources, lack of educational opportunities, and endemic corruption.

The next papal stop will be in Timor-Leste, a nation that is over 97 percent Catholic. More than two decades after its independence, the country is still struggling with high levels of poverty and corruption. While the Catholic clergy historically played a central role in resistance against the Indonesian army, its capacity to support economic development and public institutions is coming under scrutiny.

A victim of its own success, the local Church has become part of the establishment. Its capacity to foster significant change is declining, and skepticism against the institution is growing. Although piety and

faith remain strong, many believe that the freedom of the land needs to be followed by the freedom of the population. Catholicism has to demonstrate its socioeconomic relevance – otherwise Timor-Leste could become the Québec of Asia, with the majority of believers leaving the church abruptly.

Additionally, Francis will face the thorny question of Bishop Belo. [It is now well-documented that Carlos Ximenes Belo](#), the former bishop of Dili, hero of independence, and Nobel Prize winner, sexually abused many young boys. Instead of removing this Salesian bishop from Holy Orders, the Vatican quietly transferred him to Mozambique, then Portugal. Today, Belo is still a bishop.

Yet, the [controversy around his fate](#) reveals the internal tensions of global Catholicism. While international voices are asking for decisive actions from Pope Francis to prevent sexual abuse, local voices hope that socioeconomic and political emergencies will not be forgotten.

The story of Bishop Belo and the recent [pan-Asian scandals of the French MEP missionaries](#) highlight that a number of Asian Churches and the Vatican itself struggle to effectively sanction deviant clerics and to transform mentalities.

Declarations of goodwill appear increasingly insufficient.

Finally, Pope Francis will stop by Singapore from September 11 to 13. In the most religiously diverse country of the world, a key event will be the interreligious meeting that Francis will have with 500 young people at the Catholic Junior College. The underlying message is that dialogue between religious traditions needs public institutions to grow theological depth and social support.

By developing a strong network of educational institutions where Christians are often a minority among students, the Catholic Church is investing in Asian societies. Despite a number of anti-Christian prejudices, which claim that confessional schools are sites of proselytism, Catholic schools are a distinct space of interreligious encounter and engagement. The papal visit will highlight that religions are not simply coexisting side by side, exclusively serving the needs of their respective communities. Through their schools, Asian Catholics live, learn, and grow with non-Catholics.

With the same insistence on education, Francis will also visit the prestigious National University of Singapore to meet with the authorities, civil society, and the diplomatic corps. As a leading institution for academic research, this university has

recently [established Buddhist Studies](#) and Sikh Studies – and is now exploring options to develop Christian Studies.

Why Asia?

To return to the initial question of why the Holy See is giving priority to Asia, it appears that numerous motivations guide the papal journey. Integral development, ecological crisis, regional tensions, interreligious dialogue, and sex abuse crises are all important aspects to consider.

At the same time, the communication from the Vatican insists on the pastoral dimension of these Asian trips. The pope wants to manifest his personal proximity to Asian people. By visiting these distant places alongside more than 60 international journalists reporting on the different stops of the trip, the Holy See fosters cross-cultural dialogue as well as unity and communion within global Catholicism.

The journalists of the papal airplane will help global audiences understand the realities of the Asia-Pacific. With the upcoming papal visit, the world will hear more about Indonesia, Papua New Guinea, Timor-Leste, and Singapore.

Yet, this search for mutual understanding is not simply a geopolitical concern of Rome. It is a theological priority of Catholicism. In

Catholic doctrine, ecclesial unity is essential to manifest the distinct presence of the only Christ. As the physical distance among churches can threaten this communion, the Holy See deploys various efforts, including papal visits.

The personal visit of the Pontiff reinforces the attachment of local Catholics to the seat of Rome and its vital authority. These highly visible papal visits are designed to strengthen unity and cohesion within the Universal Catholic Church, an institution of 1.3 billion people.

The Vatican also has to compete with other voices of the Church. Some reactionary entities of the Catholic Church are raising their voices against the leadership of Pope Francis. They flood Catholic networks with narratives that look pious on the surface but undermine the current direction of reform of world Catholicism.

Not long ago, the Argentinian Pope described a powerful American Catholic news agency as “[the work of the devil](#).” Many speculated that Francis was referring to EWTN, a well-funded U.S.-centric network with a number of subchannels and devotees in Asia.

By building Catholic unity and communion, papal trips also contribute to the current geopolitical translation of the Holy See.

Despite its geographic location, the Vatican is

not a European state only. From a politico-religious perspective, the sovereignty of the Holy See cannot be reduced to a few hectares located in Rome. It has a universal ambition. The sovereign entity that sustains the action of the pope manifests a key aspect of Catholic theology, the ruling presence of Christ in people's lives.

Yet, the current sovereignty of the Holy See is deeply indebted to Western history and European legal structures. To express its global significance through universal categories, the Vatican has to find ways to engage with other civilizations, political systems, and socioeconomic regions. Papal visits to Asia are part of this contemporary translation of the Holy See.

Asia is not only becoming the most consequential region of the 21st century. It is a continent where a number of religious, cultural, and political traditions have proven to be truly resilient. They shape global affairs and stand as an alternative to Western hegemony.

In this context, the Holy See is actively engaged with Asian nations, states, and traditions, not to merely convert Asian people but to transform itself. The path to translate its sovereignty and better manifest its universal relevance goes through Asia.

And this has been a priority for Francis since the beginning of his papacy in 2013.

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