

Pope Francis arrives in Thailand, to meet King, PM Prayut today



Pope Francis arriving at Bangkok's Don Mueang International Airport yesterday. He is the first pontiff to visit Thailand in 35 years. PHOTO: EPA-EFE

BANGKOK • Pope Francis arrived in Thailand yesterday and was greeted by the cheering faithful on the first leg of an Asian tour that will also take him to Japan and carry a message of inter-religious dialogue and nuclear disarmament.

The pontiff landed just after midday at Bangkok's Don Mueang International Airport, where he stepped off the plane and was met by his missionary cousin, Sister Ana Rosa Sivori, who has lived in Thailand for decades.

The welcome party included Thailand's Deputy Prime Minister Somkid Jatusripitak and children in traditional ethnic minority dress, one of whom Pope Francis stopped to hug.

This is the Pope's third trip to Asia - and his 32nd abroad - taking him to two Buddhist-majority countries with minority Roman Catholic populations.

He is the first pontiff in nearly four decades to visit Thailand, where the nearly 400,000-strong Catholic community makes up a little more than 0.5 percent of the population. The last visit from a pontiff was in 1984, by Pope John Paul II.

Before his arrival, Pope Francis had praised the country as a "multi-ethnic nation" and hoped his trip would strengthen the Roman Catholic community's bonds of friendship with "many Buddhist brothers and sisters".

"I trust that my visit will help to highlight the importance of inter-religious dialogue, mutual understanding, and fraternal cooperation," the Pope said in the video marking his visit from Nov 20 to 23.

Pope Francis' visit has stirred excitement among Thailand's Catholic community, who were out in force yesterday waiting for his motorcade near the Vatican City

embassy. They included a costumed mascot designed to resemble the Pope and children yelling “Sawadee Pa (Hello Father)”.

Today, the Pope will meet the 20th Supreme Patriarch Somdej Phra Maha Muneewong – the head of Thailand’s Buddhist clergy. He will also meet King Maha Vajiralongkorn and Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha.

His day will end with a holy mass at the national stadium that tens of thousands are expected to attend.

Tomorrow, the Pope’s day will be filled with meetings with priests and bishops of Thailand, and it will end with a youth-oriented mass at a cathedral.

On Saturday, the pontiff will fly to Japan, where he will visit Tokyo, Hiroshima, and Nagasaki till next Tuesday. He is also expected to deliver a keynote address on nuclear arms.

Few aspects of life are high-tech free in Japan, including an official song written by composer Jun Inoue to welcome the Pope.

The song, Protect All Life - The Signs Of The Times, is themed on the Pope’s Japan visit and was partly composed using an artificial intelligence-powered program Mr. Inoue created that can write a piece of music in a few seconds.

The song includes dance steps and stylized hand gestures that are the Japanese sign language version of the lyrics, with a teaching video posted on the official website for the Pope’s visit.

Theme songs for papal visits have been composed before: One was also unveiled for Thailand.

This will be only the second papal visit to Japan and the first in 38 years.

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