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The Americas

## Pope Francis ends his Mexico tour praying for migrants at the U.S. border

By **Joshua Partlow** and **Gabriela Martinez** February 17 at 7:00 AM

CIUDAD JUAREZ, Mexico — Overlooking the flood lights and barbed wire that line the U.S. border, Pope Francis on Wednesday quietly prayed for the migrants who have died during their journeys to America, as thousands of people watched on both sides of the Rio Grande's fortified shores.

In what amounted to a symbolic rebuke of America's presidential campaign rhetoric — which has included calls for mass deportations of illegal immigrants and a huge border wall — the pope prayed atop a platform that overlooked the frontier. The pontiff waved and made the sign of the cross to a crowd cheering across the river in El Paso, Tex., suggesting his concern for those transiting through danger, in Mexico and beyond.

The pope laid flowers at the foot of a giant cross that had been erected at the top of the ramp for the brief afternoon ceremony. Nearby, thousands who had come to the Juarez fairgrounds for a Mass to be said by the pope on the last day of his trip to Mexico observed a moment of silence.

Maria Mijares, a 38-year-old housewife, stood for hours behind a metal barrier under a scorching sun, waiting for the pope to speak. More than a decade ago, she was caught crossing the Rio Grande twice, she said, but her husband is an American citizen now hospitalized in Texas.

"They're denying my children the right to see their father," she said, gesturing toward El Paso. "There shouldn't be so many separated families or children without their parents."

The visit to Juarez, a city that represents both migration and the drug-war violence that has tormented Mexico in recent years, marked the conclusion of the pope's six-day trip to Mexico.

From the time he stepped onto the red carpet at the Mexico City airport, Francis has offered pointed critiques of the failings in Mexico's government and society, pressing his papal finger on the country's most [sensitive](#) wounds. In front of President Enrique Peña Nieto, whose popularity has plummeted amid conflict-of-interest scandals and atrocities linked to security forces, the pope [chastised](#) Mexico's leaders

for a culture of corruption. Before the nation's Catholic bishops, the pope warned against social climbing and putting faith in the "chariots and horses of today's pharaohs." In a vast slum outside the capital, he [spoke](#) of the dangers of wealth and greed.

Many church observers say that the pope, the Argentine-born son of an Italian father, finds special importance in the immigration issue, particularly at a time when [large numbers of refugees](#) are traversing the Middle East and Europe.

The pope's visit created a festive atmosphere in this city, his face smiling from pins, T-shirts, posters and billboards that said Juarez welcomed him "with open arms." Schools and businesses were closed, and there was a heavy military and police presence. Across the border, in El Paso, thousands of people packed a football stadium to watch streaming video of the Mass. Others from El Paso crossed the border out of curiosity to see things first-hand.

"This is good for the border," Amit Ghosh, a 55-year-old owner of a computer business, said as he walked through the crowds before the Mass. "He's bringing people together. What is a two-hour Mass going to do to change millions of lives? Nothing. But he can give people hope."

In the Republican primary race, Donald Trump and other candidates have vowed to increase border security and sharply limit the entry of Syrian refugees. Trump has threatened to [ban most Muslims from visiting](#) the United States, [revoke birthright citizenship](#) for children of unauthorized migrants, and build [a multibillion-dollar wall](#) to seal off the stream of Mexicans and Central Americans fleeing violence and poverty.

The pope's visit here was a not-so-subtle repudiation of all that.

"The pope wanted to come to Juarez to make public the suffering of the migrants," said the Rev. Roberto Luna, a priest in Ciudad Juarez. "The pope says that this world is a house for everyone. He's convinced that we should treat migrants as brothers."

Even before he arrived, Francis was blasted by Trump, who called the pontiff "a very political person." Speaking in a [Fox Business Network interview](#) last week, Trump added that he did not think the pope "understands the danger of the open border we have with Mexico."

"And I think Mexico got him to do it because Mexico wants to keep the border just the way it is, because they're making a fortune and we're losing," Trump added.

The Vatican spokesman, the Rev. Federico Lombardi, responded late Tuesday that “the pope always talks about migration problems all around the world,” the Associated Press reported.

Lombardi added that Pope Francis also focuses on “the duties we have to solve these problems in a humane manner, of hosting those who come from other countries in search of a life of dignity and peace.”

Earlier in the day, the pope visited inmates at a state prison where dozens have died in riots in recent years. In that meeting, he spoke of the importance of mercy and shared humanity as a way to “break the cycle of violence and crime.”

“We have already lost many decades thinking and believing that everything will be resolved by isolating, separating, incarcerating and ridding ourselves of problems, believing that these policies really solve problems,” Francis said.

Mexican priests and analysts said the pope delivered an important message at a time when the issues of migration and asylum have become so important.

“The influence that the pope can have is to remind us that we are all migrants,” said the Rev. Nicolas Villanueva Arellano, a priest in the Tijuana archdiocese whose father was a resident in California. “More than building walls, we should be trying to build bridges.”

“He’s calling us to be compassionate to people who have to move from one place to another,” Villanueva added. “They’re not doing it because they want to. Necessity obliges them.”

“For the pope, it is very important to send this message and call attention to the thousands of people [leaving home], and not just in Mexico, because it’s a situation happening across the world,” said Maria Soledad Loaeza Tovar, a professor at the College of Mexico and an expert in foreign relations. “He emphasizes the theme of the marginalized, of the excluded, of those who feel isolated, who feel they’re not part of society.”

A visit to Juarez is “the most visible signal” of the pope’s opinion on cross-border migration, Luna said.

“This pope, he creates community, hope. He brings happiness to people,” he said. “That will be his legacy in history.”

*Martinez reported from Mexico City.*

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