

Pope to Mexican Youth: “Jesus Would Never Ask Us to Be Hit Men”

Saying Jesus would never ask them to be “hit men”, Pope Francis begged young people in Mexico’s gang-infested heartland on Tuesday to shun the lure of easy money and big cars offered by drug traffickers.

Gang wars over the methamphetamine trade have torn the western state of Michoacan apart. Widespread kidnapping and extortion by gangs have sparked an uprising by vigilante groups.

“It is a lie to believe that the only way to live, or to be young, is to entrust oneself to drug dealers or others who do nothing but sow destruction and death,” he told young people at a stadium rally in Morelia, the capital of Michoacan.

“Jesus would never ask us to be hit men,” the pope said. “He would never send us out to death.”

More than 100,000 people have been killed in Mexico’s drug war over the last decade as rival gangs fight over territory and smuggling routes to the United States.

Francis, the first Latin American pope, is traveling to some of the poorest and most violent corners of Mexico on a six-day trip to bring a message of hope to millions of marginalized people.

While appealing to the young to shun a life where fleeting happiness is found in easy money, fast cars and brand-name clothes, Francis also took a swipe on Tuesday at Mexican authorities for failing to provide opportunities for the young.

“It is hard to feel the wealth of a nation when there are no

opportunities for dignified work, no possibilities for study or advancement, when you feel your rights are being trampled on, which then leads you to extreme situations,” the pope told them.

There was tight security for the visit to Morelia, a picturesque city known for its Spanish colonial architecture, given scattered outbursts of violence in recent months.

It is Francis’ first trip to Mexico as pontiff.

In Mexico City, he chastised bishops for being gossips obsessed with coddling wealthy patrons and failing to denounce the evils of the drug trade.

Be Front-Line Priests

On Tuesday morning, the Argentine pontiff urged priests not to be resigned to evils around them like drug trafficking, and not to remain entrenched in their churches, but rather to head out to the front lines to help those suffering.

Before the rally with the young, Francis visited Morelia’s 17th century baroque cathedral. Tens of thousands of people who could not enter his events lined the streets for a glimpse of the pope.

“It’s a miracle that he has chosen to come here to lift our spirits,” said housewife Maria Hernandez, 66. “Michoacan has suffered so much.”

In 2014, the state descended into bitter conflict as vigilante groups took up arms against the powerful Knights Templar drug gang.

President Enrique Pena Nieto’s government sent in the army and forged an uneasy alliance with the vigilantes.

Before Francis entered another stadium in Morelia for a

morning Mass, the crowd counted aloud to 43, a gesture to remember dozens of trainee teachers who were abducted and apparently massacred by a drug gang in league with corrupt police in 2014 in the neighboring state of Guerrero.

As many as 200,000 Catholics are expected to cross from El Paso, Texas into Ciudad Juarez, Mexico on Wednesday to see Francis in a massive pilgrimage likely to choke roads and immigration offices. {eo}

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