

Pope Benedict XVI to visit Cuba, Mexico next year

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VATICAN CITY (RNS) Pope Benedict XVI confirmed on Monday (Dec. 12) that he will travel to Cuba and Mexico next year.

"Supported by divine Providence, I have the intention to make an apostolic trip to Mexico and Cuba before Easter," he said at the end of his homily during a special Mass in St. Peter's Basilica to celebrate the 200th anniversary of the independence of Latin American countries.

According to reports in South American news outlets, the visit will occur March 23-29.

The Vatican's chief spokesman, the Rev. Federico Lombardi, said the trip would coincide with the 400th anniversary of the image of the Virgin of Charity, the patroness of Cuba.

Lombardi had also warned that the pope would not travel to Mexico City as the city's high altitude made it an "inadvisable" destination for the 84-year-old pope.

Benedict said he hoped his trip would contribute to the construction of a society "rooted in the development of the common good, the triumph of love and the spread of justice."

After a historic visit by the late Pope John Paul II in 1998, relations between the Vatican and Cuba's communist regime have improved in recent years. This year church officials helped secure the release of 115 political prisoners who left Cuba to go into exile in Spain.

The Vatican ambassador to Cuba, Monsignor Giovanni Angelo Becciu, a key figure in Vatican dialogue with the Castro regime, was promoted last May to the No. 2 position in the Vatican's Secretariate of State.