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#PopeInDC: economy, poverty, social justice and politics on the agenda

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WASHINGTON – Pope Francis is scheduled to arrive in the capital at 4 p.m. Tuesday. But before his feet touch U.S. soil for the first time, experts and advocates have been speculating on the themes the pope is likely to take up during his official speeches.

Here are a few of them.

Economy and poverty

Pope Francis has placed the plight of the poor at the center of his papacy. He is expected to speak about poverty and about how the excesses of the free-market, capitalist system have allowed for rising inequalities and for spreading a mentality of profit at any price.

“Pope Francis has condemned the idolatry of the free-market economy,” Michael Sean Winters, a reporter at the National Catholic Reporter, said Tuesday at the CATO Institute. To the pope, the market should be a tool to allow human beings to be lifted out of poverty.

“Even if a system has lifted millions out of poverty, if it is still excluding some people, then it is an unjust system, unworthy of the human person,” he said. The pope criticizes this system, which “has converted Christmas into a holiday that teaches young children to be greedy, when it is a holiday about God becoming poor in human flesh.”

Pope Francis is not going to be preaching economic policies, John Gehring, Catholic program director at Faith in Public Life, said Tuesday at a congressional briefing on the pope’s visit. He will seek to push for a humanization of capitalism instead of it being the “economy that kills” as the pope usually describes capitalism.

Social justice

Pope Francis and the church are here to offer moral guidance about how to act on realities, and about how to have compassion toward the cry of the poor, said John Garvey, president of the Catholic University of America, at the CATO Institute. The pope’s social Catholic teachings are a reminder of values that need to be portrayed in a community. Generosity, simplicity, self-

surrender and cooperation should prevail, not greed, self-assertion, thrift and ruthless competition.

Speaking at the Woman's National Democratic Club on Tuesday, Sister Simone Campbell, director of NETWORK but better known as the leader of last year's Nuns on the Bus Tour, said that the pope advocates for a system of inclusion.

"The way forward is community," she said.

People-centered development is likely to be the guiding thread through his three days in Washington. Ashley McGuire, senior fellow at the Catholic Association, said she expects Pope Francis to call for communities to come together and rid themselves of radical individualism. Solidarity, tolerance and courage to move beyond fears are also likely features of his speeches.

Resetting U.S. political discourse

Christopher Hale, executive director at Catholics in Alliance for the Common Good, said Pope Francis has the potential to reset U.S. political discourse, especially in this pre-2016 election period when six Catholics – five Republicans and one Democrat – are running for president.

"Pope Francis will remind us that politics is about substance, not spectacle," Gerhing said, criticizing what he called the media-powered "Trumpification" of politics.

"His message brings the liberals and conservatives together," Stephen Schneck director of the Institute for Policy Research & Catholic Studies, said. The pope's unique ability to unite people across political and socioeconomic borders will help his message reach a greater number of political institutions. Although he will not get to policy specifics, the pope is going to provide "a moral and spiritual framework to rethink social issues."

"Pope Francis is, I think, going to make us bridge the divide," Campbell said. The pope will seek to build bridges rather than erect walls, as is the current political rhetoric among the conservatives. When 70 percent of Republicans agree that the pope has been leading the Catholic Church in the right direction, Campbell said, addressing the issue of immigration to staunch anti-immigration defenders will undeniably reset the political debate.

That information is part of a report, *The Francis Factor*, a survey of the impact of Pope Francis on Catholic voters, conducted by YouGov for Faith in Public Life and the Institute for Policy Research & Catholic Studies.

When Pope Francis says that people should include the excluded and the poor first, Hale said, the pope is going against U.S. political rhetoric that places the rich and powerful at the center of political movements.