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Newly named cardinal Giorgio Marengo poses for a photo, during a press conference at the Vatican, Saturday, Aug. 27, 2022. The young cardinal in charge of Mongolia's tiny Catholic community said Monday, July 17, 2023 that the faithful there were thrilled Pope Francis is making the first-ever papal visit to Mongolia, saying it's evidence of his willingness to travel to the farthest corners of the globe to minister to just a few hundred members of his flock. (AP Photo/Andrew Medichini, File)

Nicole Winfield

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Vatican City — July 18, 2023

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The young cardinal in charge of Mongolia's tiny Catholic community said July 17 that Pope Francis' upcoming visit to a country with just 1,450 Catholics is evidence of his willingness to travel to the farthest corners of the globe to minister to even a handful of the faithful.

Italian Cardinal Giorgio Marengo, who has been a missionary in Mongolia for two decades, spoke to reporters after delivering a speech on how Catholic missionaries "whisper" the Gospel there in hopes of spreading the faith, simply and quietly and in one-on-one relationships.

"When you whisper, you whisper to an individual or a few people, you cannot whisper to many people at the same time because they simply will not hear you," he said. "And I think this visit will also somehow manifest the attention that the (pope) has for every individual, every person who embarks in this journey of faith."

Francis' Aug. 31-Sept. 4 visit will take him to a country sandwiched between China and Russia at a time of Vatican tensions with both: Just this weekend Francis caved into Beijing's unilateral appointment in April of a new bishop for Shanghai and formally confirmed the decision. And in Russia, the Holy See is trying to toe a diplomatic balancing act with Moscow over its invasion of Ukraine.

Marengo declined to speculate on the diplomatic implications for the trip, stressing that the first papal visit to Mongolia was evidence more of how Francis' "heart burns with love for the universal church, and especially the church where she lives in a minority context.

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He said there are but 1,450 Catholics in the country, most of them in the capital Ulaanbaatar. According to statistics by the Catholic nonprofit Aid to the Church in Need, Mongolia is 53% Tantric Buddhist, 39% atheist, 3% Muslim, 3% Shaman and 2% Christian.

During the visit, Francis will preside over an interfaith meeting and inaugurate a new Catholic charity house that provides assistance for the poor, destitute and women needing shelter from domestic violence.

The 49-year-old Marengo, who became the youngest cardinal when Francis tapped him last year, said he hoped the visit would help the Mongolian faithful understand they are part of a global religion.

"I hope ... they will feel how wide is the Catholic Church around the world," he said, adding that it's not easy to feel that in Mongolia because Catholics there are so few, he said.