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## **Forgiveness a key theme for 2018 visit to Ireland.**

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As Pope Francis's plane, Shepherd One, with an Irish tricolour and the flag of the Holy See flying from the cockpit windows, touched down at Dublin Airport on the morning of Saturday 25 August 2018, it marked the first visit by a reigning pontiff to Ireland in almost 40 years. Not since Pope John Paul II famously kissed the tarmac at Dublin Airport in 1979 had the leader of the Roman Catholic Church paid a visit to Ireland. However, it was not the first time Pope Francis made this journey. Father Jorge Mario Bergoglio, as he was then known, had come to study English in Dublin in 1980. His only trip here as pope came some 38 years later, when he was aged 81. This followed an invitation to attend the World Meeting of Families in Dublin and therefore was not classified as an official State visit, but rather a "pastoral visit". However, Pope Francis's first stop here after Dublin Airport was still Áras an Uachtaráin for a private meeting with President Michael D Higgins.

In the visitors' book there, the Pope wrote of his "gratitude for the warm welcome" and that he assured the "people of Ireland of my prayers that almighty God may guide and protect you all". Next, it was to Dublin Castle, where the Pope received a warm welcome from then-taoiseach Leo Varadkar, who went on to speak about a shared history of sorrow and shame. Pope Francis addressed the Church's handling of clerical child sex abuse in his response. He said: "The failure of ecclesiastical authorities - bishops, religious superiors, priests and others - adequately to address these repellent crimes has rightly given rise to outrage and remains a source of pain and shame for the Catholic community. I myself share those sentiments." Clerical child sex abuse was an issue that would be a recurring theme on his two-day visit. Pope Francis privately met some survivors of abuse and visited St Mary's Pro-Cathedral, where he sat for a number of minutes in silent prayer at the Candle of Innocence, a perpetually lit candle for the victims of clerical sex abuse.

Protests to the Pope's visit were staged that Saturday and acted as a reminder of the hurt that had been caused to many, as well as the other deepfelt issues that activists were calling on the Church to address.

But there were also scenes of joy as thousands lined the streets to see the pontiff make his way to the Capuchin Day Centre in his popemobile. He met friars, volunteers, and service users at the centre, which supports many of Dublin's homeless community. The day concluded at one of the key events of his visit, the Festival of Families gathering at Croke Park. Described as a musical celebration of family, organisers said its purpose was to remind people about those who are struggling, particularly migrants and refugees.

Among the high-profile acts entertaining the tens of thousands of people who attended the event that evening were Andrea Bocelli and Daniel O'Donnell. Meanwhile, young Irish dancers got to showcase their skills in front of the pontiff, who was also treated to a special performance of Riverdance. The second day of his visit saw Pope Francis arrive at a wet and windy Ireland West Airport. The weather was not kind, but it did not stop around 45,000 people gathering at Knock Shrine to see the Bishop of Rome as he prayed the Angelus. He also spoke to those gathered at the Marian Shrine about the importance of family prayer, reconciliation in the North and again, the issue of clerical abuse. Before boarding the plane for his flight back to Dublin that Sunday morning, Pope Francis was asked to sign a Mayo football jersey. Back in the capital, the Pope's final public engagement was in the Phoenix Park to celebrate a papal mass. Half-a-million tickets had been circulated in advance but far fewer turned up on the day. During the mass, Pope Francis asked for forgiveness for the sins of the Church, its clerics, and the hierarchy who did not take charge. "We ask forgiveness for the abuses in Ireland, abuses of power and conscience; sexual abuses on the part of qualified members of the Church," the pontiff told the thousands gathered at a rain-soaked Phoenix Park. It was a short trip - Pope Francis was in Ireland for just 32 hours and after a final meeting with Irish bishops, he climbed the steps to board the Aer Lingus plane home before pausing for one last wave.

However, the tone for the Pope's visit was set before he even stepped off the plane. Five days preceding his arrival on Irish soil, he published a 2,000-word letter to members of the Catholic Church addressing previous failures to deal with clerical sex abuse and its cover-up. The theme of forgiveness had touched every one of his events over that whirlwind weekend in Ireland for Pope Francis in August 2018.