

22.9.2011 Alaska Dispatch

Pope finds a divided Berlin during Germany visit

Michael Steininger

Pope Benedict XVI has arrived for a four-day tour in Germany, the third time the pontiff has returned to his home country, and the first time he has made an official visit to the capital. But the city is deeply divided over how to welcome the man, who, as Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith Joseph Ratzinger, was considered a Roman Catholic hard-liner, and who, as leader of the Catholic church, is seen by many here to have failed to address necessary reforms.

In his first speech, the pope criticized an increasing indifference toward religious matters in Germany. "Religion is the foundation for togetherness in society," he said, standing with German President Christian Wulff – a divorced and remarried Catholic – in front of Bellevue presidential palace.

Even before he arrived, a bitter controversy had broken out over the pope's address to the German parliament, the Bundestag, this afternoon.

"He is one of the few true authorities of our time," said Norbert Lammert, president of the Bundestag and a conservative parliamentarian. "It is an honor and a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to have him speak in the plenary."

But more than a hundred MPs chose to miss this opportunity. "The pope holds views I consider not just highly controversial, but dangerous," says Hans-Christian Ströbele, a lawyer and Green MP. "Why should the elected representatives of the German people honor a man who risks people's lives when he condemns the use of condoms, who does not support the important role his own church plays in places like Latin America, who is against homosexuals?"

Berlin has a large gay community, and many of them were among the 5,000 or so protesters who gathered at Potsdamer Platz, not far from the Bundestag, while the pontiff gave his speech. "The pope represents inhumane gender and sexual policies," says Lisa Garbe, spokeswoman of Berlin's Gay and Lesbian Association. "He calls a free society the 'dictatorship of relativism.' This can't go unchallenged."

It is a view Berlin's openly gay mayor, Klaus Wowereit, sympathizes with. Nevertheless, the mayor met the pope at the Olympic stadium where mass was celebrated in front of 70,000 people. **One of them was Christian Weisner of the grassroots movement "We are the Church."**

"The Catholic Church is in a religious and structural crisis," he says. "This visit should be a chance to address the crisis, to start the renewal. But little I have heard so far makes me believe it will."

The crisis Mr. Weisner refers to is most apparent in the shrinking number of church members. More than half a million Germans have turned their backs on the Catholic Church since Joseph Ratzinger became pope. In 2010 alone, when several cases of child abuse through priests in Germany became known, more than 180,000 left the church, according to an internal church survey. At the same time, the number of priests has declined dramatically, a process that in Weisner's opinion could be reversed only if the Vatican's tough stance on celibacy and the ordination of women softened.

Officially, his visit is aimed at interfaith dialogue. In Berlin, Benedict XVI meets members of the Jewish and Muslim congregations; tomorrow, in Erfurt, where church reformer Martin Luther lived and worked, he will

speak to officials of the Protestant church. Reportedly also on his agenda is a meeting with victims of priest sexual abuse, though there is no confirmation by the Vatican.

It is such secrecy that angers Rainer Kampling. A professor, he is one of 144 German theologians who earlier this year signed a memorandum called "Church 2011 – A necessary departure," demanding an open discussion on the future direction of the Catholic church.

"The debate about the pope's speech in parliament is petty and – in my view – typically German," he says. "He is head of state of the Vatican, so he should be treated like a statesman. But Catholics like me expect from our leader openness for non-conformist views. We need a church less hierarchic, less distant to its subjects, and less hermetic to society."

Zuletzt geändert am 23.09.2011