

22.9.2011 New York Times

A papal homecoming to a combative Germany

BERLIN » Instead of a pleasant visit to his native land, the trip to Germany this week by Pope Benedict XVI promises to be a journey to one of the front lines in the battle over the future of the Roman Catholic Church.

The protests and demonstrations announced for the pope's visit are a far cry from the jubilation set off here by his election to the papacy more than six years ago. There was a naivete to that celebration, which ignored the collision course between an increasingly secular society and a church leader set on a conservative, traditional path.

Benedict will be greeted with demands for change on a variety of controversial issues, including the celibacy requirement for priests, women's role in the church, gay rights and aid for victims of sexual abuse by priests. Many in Parliament have threatened to boycott his speech to its members.

After landing Thursday at Tegel Airport in Berlin, he will be officially welcomed at Bellevue Palace by President Christian Wulff, a Catholic who divorced and remarried, and can therefore be barred in some cases from Holy Communion. His host during his stay in Berlin will be the gay Catholic mayor, Klaus Wowereit.

The tone for Benedict's visit was set this week by the cover of Der Spiegel magazine with the headline "The Obstinate," and, above a picture of the pope, the words, "A pope lets the Germans fall away from belief." In a later article in the magazine, the liberal theologian Hans Kung compared Benedict to Vladimir V. Putin, the Russian leader who consolidated power in an authoritarian Kremlin.

Matthias Matussek, a German journalist who wrote a defense of the church in that issue of Der Spiegel, said, "I am almost frightened by the rage that is greeting the pope." Matussek has been sharply critical of what he describes as a desire among reformers for a more Protestant church or even an almost democratic one. "You cannot run a world church from a discussion circle in Germany," he said. The pope is the leader of a church of about 1.2 billion followers worldwide, but its base in aging, socially liberal Europe has been eroding. The child sexual-abuse scandal that enveloped the church here and around Europe last year has continued to smolder, a slow-moving crisis of confidence and credibility.

Benedict's visit will include a sold-out Mass for 70,000 people at the Olympic Stadium on Thursday and meetings with Protestant, Jewish and Muslim leaders as part of a four-day trip that will also take him to Erfurt in the former East Germany and Freiburg in the southern part of the country.

In a televised address over the weekend, Benedict told his "fellow countrymen" that his trip was "not religious tourism, even less a show," but was instead about how "God steps back into our field of view, God who is often missing, but whom we so very much need."

Asked about a possible boycott of the pope's speech by Parliament members, the Rev. Federico Lombardi, the Vatican's spokesman, said that "for the pope to speak before Parliament doesn't mean that everyone present has to agree with what he says," but that he is someone "whose words are worthy of being taken into consideration."

The steady decline in church membership and attendance here is as much evidence of an increasingly secular society as it is a result of the abuse scandal. Last year alone, more than 181,000 German Catholics chose to officially leave the church, but almost as many, roughly 150,000, left Protestant churches as well.

Reform-minded Catholics expect a signal that the pope is responding to their concerns. "The question is to what extent this is a dialogue versus a show of force," said Christian Weisner, a spokesman for the German branch of the lay reform movement We Are Church. "It won't be enough anymore just to meet with a few abuse victims."

German Catholics are by no means alone in their increasing distance from the church and even anger toward it. In overwhelmingly Catholic Ireland, the prime minister this summer openly criticized the Vatican from the floor of Parliament. The pope's visit to austerity-stricken Spain last month was marred by demonstrations against the visit's 50 million euro price tag, or about \$68 million at current exchange rates.

Human rights lawyers and victims of clergy sexual abuse filed a complaint this month asking the International Criminal Court in The Hague to investigate and prosecute Pope Benedict and three other top Vatican officials for what they called efforts to help cover up the rape and sexual abuse of children by priests.

The church in Germany is viewed as more responsive and in many ways more liberal than elsewhere. In addition to the effort to unearth undiscovered cases of abuse, German bishops gathered over the summer with priests and churchgoers in Mannheim in an effort to improve communication and address the growing gaps between church leaders and the changing society experienced by the faithful.

But the attention riveted on the church by the pope's visit raises the stakes significantly. "If nothing comes out of this visit," said Weisner of We Are Church, "I'm afraid it will only exacerbate the crisis."

Zuletzt geändert am 23.09.2011