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Benedict in Germany

by Maureen Fiedler

According to The New York Times, Pope Benedict's third visit to his native Germany [3"> this week drew a crowd of 60,000 for his celebration of Mass.

But it also drew at least 9,000 protestors, according to police estimates. Many of the protestors were no doubt members of Wir sind Kirche (We Are Church), a church reform organization very much like the Call to Action group in the United States.

They called for church reforms that lay Catholics all over the world would like to see: an end to mandatory clerical celibacy, the ordination of women, gay rights, more open policies on family planning and much more transparency in the handling of sex abuse cases.

The Pope addressed the German Bundestag (Parliament), but his speech was boycotted by dozens of legislators because, as one legislator put it, "I thought we had separation of church and state here in our country."

We need to examine this visit in a larger context: the current state of the church in the contemporary world.

Clearly, Benedict is not able to command the crowds that the more charismatic John Paul II drew. But these developments in Germany are not simply a matter of personal qualities. When Benedict was first elected, Germans celebrated that event.

No, this journey of Benedict to Germany is rather a barometer of the lowered status of the church in the world, and the growing dissonance between church policies and the lives of ordinary Catholics the world over.

It is surely a positive development that the pope is not greeted as some type of medieval monarch. But Germany and the world are not merely shedding medieval customs. The depth of the sex abuse scandal has cut deeply, and the results have yet to be dealt with properly.

Witness Ireland in recent weeks, and the United States, as well as Germany. In addition, this refusal of the hierarchy to even consider reform in ways that lay Catholics the world over desire -- in ways that would make the church a relevant force in the modern world -- is moving the institutional church toward irrelevance.

This is the message of German Catholics. Let those who have ears. ...

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