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Pope to stroll down memory lane in Germany

By Philip Pullella

VATICAN CITY (Reuters) - Pope Benedict takes a trip down memory lane this weekend, going home to his roots in Germany's Catholic heartland of Bavaria to visit the places that influenced him as a young man.

The Sept 9-14 trip, his second to Germany in little more than a year, also gives him a chance to launch a European-wide appeal for the continent to rediscover a traditional faith that he feels is increasingly threatened by secularization.

"The purpose of the visit is precisely because I want to see again the places where I grew up, the people who touched and shaped my life," he said in an interview with German media and Vatican Radio last month.

"Naturally, I also want to express a message that goes beyond my country, just as my ministry calls me to do," he said.

He will have plenty of opportunities to remember the years spent in Germany from his birth in 1927 until the late Pope John Paul moved him in 1982 from Munich, where he served as cardinal-archbishop, to the Vatican to become the Church's top doctrinal official.

Apart from Munich, he will make a lightning visit to Marktl am Inn, where he was born and where he spent the first two years of his life, and also make stops at Regensburg, where he taught theology, and a shrine to the Blessed Virgin in Altoetting.

The Vatican has listed Wednesday, September 13, as a "private day." He will visit his brother, Monsignor Georg Ratzinger, in Regensburg and together they will visit the cemetery where their sister and parents are buried.

That evening, they will dine together in a house the pope still owns in the suburb of Pentling.

The trip, Benedict's fourth abroad since his election in 2005, will also give him an opportunity to address concerns facing the Church in Germany, where Catholics make up around a third of the population of some 82.5 million people.

GOD ELBOWED ASIDE

In last month's interview, Benedict was asked about the problems of low attendance at mass and waning Church influence on society in his homeland.

The Pope said Germany was a reflection of the rest of the Western world, where secularization has taken root and often elbowed God aside.

"It's become more difficult to believe because the world in which we find ourselves is completely made up of ourselves, and God, so to speak, doesn't appear directly anymore," he said.

"Humanity has rebuilt the world by itself and finding God inside this world has become more difficult. This is

not specific to Germany. It's something that's valid throughout the world, especially in the West," he said.

A leading dissident group based in Germany wrote an open letter to the Pope saying Church structures were "obsolete" and needed to change with the times.

The "We are Church" group called for reforms such as allowing women and married men to become priests, abolishing mandatory celibacy for priests and allowing divorced Catholics who have remarried outside the Church to receive the sacraments.

Benedict said last month he hoped his trip would also help show the world that Germans "are not just reserved, punctual and disciplined but also spontaneous, happy and hospitable."

It was not clear if the Pope would address issues such as Germany's Nazi past, which he spoke of during his first visit home as Pope in August, 2005.

The Pope served briefly in the Hitler Youth during the war when membership in the Nazi paramilitary organization was compulsory, although he was never a member of the party and his family opposed Hitler's regime.

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