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Pope: German trip can boost hope

CASTEL GANDOLFO, Italy—Pope Benedict XVI on Sunday said his trip to his German homeland this week can help generate hope there.

Benedict expressed excitement over the four-day pilgrimage as he spoke in German at his summer residence in Castel Gandolfo near Rome. He asked Germans to pray for him during the trip, which begins Thursday. Benedict said he can help them be "witnesses to hope and orientation for the future."

About 100 German lawmakers plan to boycott Benedict's speech to Parliament. The Vatican's No. 2, Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone promised Sunday that speech will be "very beautiful."

In a message broadcast on a German public television station, Benedict invited Germans to renew their faith.

But critics point to the declining number of Catholics in Germany.

Benedict's pilgrimage "takes place during the greatest worldwide crisis of the Roman Catholic church since the Reformation," the Catholic reform movement We Are Church said in a statement, in reference to exposes of systematic cover-ups by hierarchy of clergy sex abuse of minors.

The "pressing problems and defects of the church cannot and must not be cut out of the picture," in terms of what Benedict should grapple with during his trip, the group said.
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