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Pope Visiting Homeland With Mixed Views on Church

by Melissa Eddy

When Benedict XVI arrives in Berlin this week, he will be greeted in his homeland by a Lutheran chancellor, a gay mayor and a divorced, remarried Roman Catholic president.

The breadth of potential social and religious conflicts represented by the German leadership reflects the state of a nation that is proud of, but also sometimes indifferent and antagonistic toward, the German-born pontiff — and the church he represents.

In a weekend address on German television ahead of his Sept. 22-25 visit Benedict told viewers he was especially excited to visit Berlin and speak in the German parliament.

"All of this is not religious tourism, even less a show," the 84-year-old pope, born Joseph Ratzinger, said an address broadcast on ARD television late Sunday. "It is about bringing God back into our field of view; God who is often missing, but so very needed."

Not all Germans are so convinced.

Protests have been organized at all the pope's planned stops during his four-day trip. Some opposition lawmakers have said they will not attend his address to parliament and gay and student groups have announced demonstrations to be held in Berlin and Erfurt.

Berlin's openly gay mayor, Klaus Wowereit, has said that he welcomes the pontiff's visit to the capital and will meet with him personally. He has also expressed understanding for the protests planned by gay, leftist and other groups in Berlin.

"It is to be expected that in a city such as Berlin, people will be critical in their view of the Catholic Church and want to express that," said Wowereit.

Unlike Benedict's Bavarian homeland, Berlin is largely Protestant, or secular — a leftover of decades of Communist rule.

Yet even in the more staunchly Catholic southwestern city of Freiburg — the final stop on the pope's journey — a group calling itself "Freiburg Without the Pope" has been printing T-shirts depicting the city's historic cathedral sheathed in a bright pink condom.

Church organizers say the pontiff is aware of the planned protests, but is choosing instead to focus on the 260,000 people who are expected to attend Masses in Berlin's Olympic stadium and at an airfield in Freiburg, as well as a historic ecumenical service to be held with German Lutherans in the home of the Reformation.

Roughly 30 percent of Germany's 82 million inhabitants are Catholic — an equal number are Lutheran — but the Church has been losing members in recent years.

The Vatican's views on contraception, the role of women, homosexuality and its handling of the sexual abuse scandal that rocked Germany last year are seen by many here as outdated and out-of-touch.

"We are in an ongoing crisis, a shift in society, but also in the church," said Christian Weisner, a spokesman for We Are Church, a movement that calls for reforms in the Roman Catholic Church and has planned protests at all three of the pope's stops. The group was launched in Germany and Austria, but has spread to other nations.

Even an issue such as the refusal to allow remarried divorcees, such as German President Christian Wulff, to accept communion sparks heated discussions over how the Church can hold up its claims of mercifulness and forgiveness.

A recent poll indicated most Germans don't think the papal visit is particularly important. Only 14 percent of 1,008 Germans surveyed by the Forsa institute between Sept. 8-9 said the visit was of personal importance to them, compared with 55 percent that said it held "no importance whatsoever."

"There is a great potential in religion, when it is able to carry a message of hope, but that is not happening right now," Weisner said.

The potentially most sensitive topic in Germany is the church's handling of last year's sex abuse scandal. Hundreds of Germans came forward with claims that they had been sexually or physically abused by Catholic priests.

The claims sparked soul-searching within the Church and prompted Archbishop Robert Zollitsch, who heads the German Bishops Conference, to call for a process of dialogue in the church here.

Asked in an interview with the news agency dapd whether the pope would meet with abuse victims, as he has done on trips to the United States and Great Britain, Zollitsch refused to comment, although local media have reported that such plans have been made.

"The pope knows the reality of this issue in our country. I cannot say whether and, if so, how he will address it," Zollitsch said.
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