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Pope says German trip will focus on rediscovering God's presence

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VATICAN CITY (CNS) -- Pope Benedict XVI said his Sept. 22-25 trip to Germany would focus on restoring God's place in individual and social life -- as creator, spiritual guide and force for good.

The pope made the remarks in a videotaped message broadcast Sept. 17 by the German state television network. A transcript was made public by the Vatican.

Saying he was very much looking forward to his third visit to his homeland as pope, he previewed some of the main events, including his address to the German Parliament, Mass in Berlin's Olympic Stadium, visits to the Catholic enclave of Eichsfeld and a youth vigil with young people in Freiburg.

"All this is not religious tourism and even less a 'spectacle.' The meaning is explained in the theme of the visit: 'Where there is God, there is a future,'" the pope said.

"This means that God should return to our horizon, this God who is often completely absent, and yet whom we need so much," he said.

The pope said that although God cannot be scientifically proven to exist, nevertheless people can develop a capacity to perceive God in a number of ways: in the beauty of creation, in the "great rationality" of the world, in the words of Scripture and by meeting people -- both famous and lesser-known -- who have been touched by God.

He said one very important event would be his encounter with Lutheran leaders at a monastery where Martin Luther once studied. He cautioned, however, against expecting any "sensational" ecumenical developments.

"In fact, the true greatness of this event is that we can come together to think, listen to the Word of God and pray together. In this way we will be very close and demonstrate a true ecumenism," he said.

The pope's words echoed the comments of the Vatican spokesman, Jesuit Father Federico Lombardi, who told reporters Sept. 16 that the pontiff would focus on the fundamentals of the faith during his visit rather than wade into specific controversies and debates that have simmered among German Catholics.

"It's a misunderstanding to think that the future of the church depends on the question of priestly celibacy, for example. It depends on whether people believe in God," Father Lombardi said.

The lay organization We Are Church, which is popular in Germany, said in a statement Sept. 18 that it would be wrong for the pope to avoid addressing what it called the "pressing problems and defects of the church."

"God's crisis and the church's crisis must not be played off against each other," the group said. It cited a drop in the number of German Catholics in recent years, and said increasing pastoral problems show that "reforms are long overdue."

The organization mentioned the issues of human rights in the church, the Vatican's refusal to recognize Protestant denominations as "churches in the full sense," and what it said was a privileged relationship the Catholic Church enjoys with the state in Germany.

About 100 of Germany's 620 parliamentarians have said they plan to boycott the pope's speech to the Bundestag, the lower house of the German parliament. They say the papal event violates the principle of the separation of church and state.

At his briefing with reporters, Father Lombardi said the Vatican was not overly disturbed about the planned boycott. He said the pope was going at the invitation of the president of the parliament, and would address "those who want to hear him, and are ready to listen to this message with respect."

German Chancellor Angela Merkel, in a video broadcast Sept. 17, said she would be happy to welcome Pope Benedict to Germany. She said it was important to "strengthen the unity of Christians" in an increasingly secular German society.

At his weekly blessing Sept. 18, the pope returned to the theme of greater awareness of God and the need to transform society through the Gospel. He said the church's "new evangelization" program aims to help people in traditionally Christian countries to rediscover the beauty of the faith.
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