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Why the pope angers Germans

As Pope Benedict XVI visits his homeland, here's why so many are protesting.

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BERLIN — Amid fanfare and pomp, German-born Pope Benedict XVI will make his first state visit to his homeland Thursday. But his triumphant return is marred by indifference, controversy and even mass protests.

The pontiff might be more unpopular in his native country than anywhere else in Europe.

The Catholic leader is delivering a speech to the German Parliament in Berlin, but empty seats are expected. Nearly 100 left-wing parliamentarians have announced they will boycott the speech because it compromises Germany's state-church divide. Around the corner, in front the Brandenburg Gate, at least 20,000 protestors are expected to gather.

In the run-up to the visit, the pope was on the defensive. "This isn't about religious tourism and even less about a show," he said on "The World on Sunday," the same show his popular predecessor appeared on in 1987 to great acclaim. "It should be about bringing God back into our field of vision, that often absent God who we still need so dearly."

Controversy is nothing new for Pope Benedict XVI. He faced widespread demonstrations in Spain and in the U.K. during recent visits. But here in Germany, the home of Martin Luther and a staunchly Protestant former East, his visit is especially unwelcome to many. He has waited more than a year after a series of church sex-abuse scandals broke in Germany to come home and address them. That has been a major sore spot.

A recent survey conducted by the German weekly magazine, Stern, found that 86 percent of those polled considered the pontiff's visit to be "rather unimportant" or "not important at all." Germany is home to nearly 25 million Catholics, about 30 percent of the population.

"I think the most criticism doesn't come from outside but from within — from Catholics who want reform," said Hermann Häring, a theology scholar and former professor at Radboud University Nijmegen in the Netherlands. "The reason behind the criticism is that the pope has continuously stalled on long-overdue reforms in the church."

Pope Benedict XVI wasn't always so unpopular here. When he became the church's top leader in 2005, the best-selling German tabloid Bild had him splashed across their front page: "Wir sind Papst," (We are the pope), read the huge headline. Six years later, the pontiff's standing has plummeted. Germany's Catholic church, the richest in Europe, finds itself mired in a deep crisis.

Allegations of child molestation and rape by German clergy began surfacing in January 2010, embarrassing the country's Catholic leadership and sparking a fierce debate over the church's rules and management practices.

The scandal erupted when a small group of alumni at an elite Jesuit school in Berlin, Canisius College, told the director that two former teachers had sexually abused students during the 1970s and 1980s. Dozens more students came forward with their own stories of abuse. Hotlines set up last spring to report abuse received 11,000 calls within a one-year period.

The Canisius College incident unleashed a wave of allegations from Germany's Catholics, as well as from boarding schools and other institutions — including some closest to the pope himself.

During his time as cardinal in the 1980s, the pope — then Josef Ratzinger — was copied on a memo regarding a German priest who had sexually abused young boys in the western German city of Essen. The priest was transferred to the Munich diocese and allowed to work without restrictions. He was later convicted of further abuse committed during his time at parishes in the region.

The Vatican maintains that Cardinal Ratzinger's deputy was responsible for handling the paperwork and the case.

That excuse hasn't satisfied many victims. "The pope is responsible for what he knows and what he doesn't know," said Norbert Denef, head of Netzwerk B, an organization working on behalf of church abuse victims. "He's politically responsible for what happens beneath him. He can't take himself out of the equation and say 'I didn't know about it.'"

Denef was sexually abused by a priest in the town of Delitzsch from the age of 10 through 16, and again for another two years by the church's organist. He received €25,000 (about $34,000) in compensation in 2005. He says one diocese even asked for his secrecy in return for a payout. He refused.

"That abuse that I suffered from between the ages of 10 and 18 has followed me my entire life, day and night, until today," said Denef.

The abuse cases and cover-up shook the German public, prompting calls for investigations and action. More than a year later, a government-appointed panel recommended compensation of €5,000 ($6,875) each for victims of abuse in Catholic foster homes. And a Benedictine monastery in the state of Bavaria recently ruled it would dole out between €5,000 and €20,000 ($6,875 and $27,500) to some 70 former students after systematic abuse was uncovered there last year. Victims have called these compensation sums humiliating.

"They gambled away the people's trust," said Denef.

The scandals have accelerated an already alarming trend for the country's Catholic officials: Germans are leaving the church in droves. In 2010, over 181,000 Catholics broke ties with the church — nearly 60,000 more than the previous year.

"The church has to address the sexual-abuse scandal in a credible and thorough manner," said Häring. "That doesn't mean just talking with the victims and compensating them. The church also has to look at the reasons [behind it">."

Experts say many of Germany's Catholics have also been disappointed by the church's inability to even entertain important reforms: from abolishing celibacy to ordaining female priests and welcoming divorcees.

"The church members who want reform are always discredited and not welcomed — neither by the pope nor by the bishops," said Sigrid Grabmeier, a press spokesperson for the church-reform movement "Wir Sind Kirche," (We Are Church). "It creates an unwelcome climate that makes people leave."

Other experts say the pope has tarnished his own image at home by disappointing Germans since the heady days of his election six years ago.

“That euphoria that the pope is effectively one of us, I think that turned into disappointment because a lot of people thought that their interests and concerns, that the German perspective, would play a big role,” said Martina Blasberg-Kuhnke, a theology expert and professor at the University of Osnabrück. “That’s definitely not what happened.”

Still, Blasberg-Kuhnke said that Pope Benedict XVI has a chance to rehabilitate his image with his visit this week, simply by listening.

“When you’re in your own country, when you can speak the language, when you essentially know the people, then you should also be able to get a sense of what the issues are in the church,” she said. “You don’t have to be everybody’s darling, but you can definitely make it clear that you are listening to the different churches and that you take seriously what is important to the people on the ground.”
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