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ANALYSIS: Pope preaches to the (ever fewer) converted in Germany

By Niels C Sorrells

Berlin - Stay a while. Don't go. We appreciate you sticking with us.

That's not what Pope Benedict XVI said during his four-day tour of his native Germany, but at times, it felt like the subtext as the pope tried to make contact with a nation that is, increasingly, moving in a separate direction from the faith.

Despite massive crowds - 60,000 in Berlin, 30,000 in Erfurt and 90,000 Freiburg - the fact remains that the Catholic Church might have its happiest days behind it in Germany. The numbers certainly cannot be encouraging to the pope and his followers.

In 1990, according to data from the German Bishop's Conference (DBK), there were 28.3 million registered Catholics in Germany. By 2010, that figure had fallen to 24.6 million.

But registration only tells part of the story. It's a designation, sometimes more cultural than religious to Germans.

People are registered Catholic as children, but may not bother to unregister when they find themselves drifting away from the church. Some people can't be bothered with the bureaucratic manoeuvres required to unregister.

A more telling figure might be the DBK's figures on church attendance, which hit their high water mark in 1960, with 11.9 million Germans claiming to be regular churchgoers.

By 2010, that figure was down to 3.1 million.

Thus, when the pope told the tens of thousands at his various masses that 'the church in Germany will overcome the great challenges of the present and future' or that 'the saints show us that it is truly possible and good to live our relationship with God in a radical way' it is possible he was only speaking exclusively to church-going Catholics, themselves a minority in Germany.

The simple fact is, modern Germany does not exactly conform to the Vatican's world view. Homosexuals can marry. In the larger Lutheran church, women officiate.

And that's before the still smouldering anger at a perceived cover-up of child sexual abuse at a variety of church institutions - some of it stretching back decades - that broke into headlines in 2010.

The news - which still trickles out as Catholic groups continue investigations - is widely perceived to have depressed church attendance and membership figures even more, and might continue to do so in the near future.

All of that meant that Benedict, born Joseph Ratzinger, was never going to have an easy time on his first state visit to his native country. But some analysts argued that he made the job even harder with speeches that were heavy in theology, but light on the common touch.

Hopes that he might reach out to Lutheran leaders at an ecumenical session on Friday also came to naught, as the two sides agreed to little more than the need to promote Christianity against an increasingly secularized Europe.

'What people are really missing out on (during this visit), is that even though he is coming to Germany, he is not recognizing the crisis situation we have here,' said Christian Weisner of the reformist Catholic movement We are Church. 'He might not even want to.'

German Catholics, says Weisner, want to discuss the issues and to be involved in bringing the church into modern times. On that count, Benedict failed, he said.

'This visit was not one of dialogue,' said Weisner. 'There were a lot of choruses, but the congregation didn't sing along.'

It was a sentiment echoed by some on the ground.

'The future of the Catholic Church is murky,' said Petra Schrader, a mother and secretary, at the pope's Berlin Olympic Stadium appearance on Thursday. 'People will stop believing if it does not change its ways.'

Anecdotally, Weisner said even the people at the papal events this week weren't marching 100 per cent in line with Benedict. A decent percentage of the youth gathering at an event with the pope Saturday was reportedly in favour of significant church liberalization.

Which might explain why the pope was sure to insert comments praising the faithful into his sermons throughout the visit. He praised people who retained their Catholic faith during the East German Communist dictatorship, during which organized religion was frowned upon.

And in Freiburg on Sunday, he made a point of reminding the crowd of all the good works church employees and organizations perform throughout Germany and of the greatness he sees lying ahead.

'The church in Germany will overcome the great challenges of the present and future, and it will remain a leaven in society,' he said. 'The church in Germany will continue to be a blessing for the entire Catholic world.'

The question then becomes, will such comments be enough to keep the faithful on board? And is it enough to just hold the line, or would outreach to the sceptics do more to ensure the church's future?

'Just saying you have to believe more strongly won't take us any further,' says Weisner. 'We find it disappointing. But then again, we didn't expect much, we know Ratzinger after all.'

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