

Pope says visit to Germany to be personal, chance to thank people

By John Thavis, Catholic News Service

VATICAN CITY (CNS) — Pope Benedict XVI's September pilgrimage to southern Germany features 14 liturgies or religious encounters and only three public secular events.

That fact alone says a lot about the pope's homecoming visit and about his entire papacy to date.

From Sept. 9 to 14, the 79-year-old pontiff will return to his Bavarian roots, stopping in Marktl am Inn where he was born, in Altotting where he used to pray at a local shrine, in Regensburg where he taught and in Munich where he was a bishop.

Along the way, he will preside over a string of public Masses, prayer services, processions and blessings. The visit is predominantly personal and religious, and the pope explained why in a recent interview with German TV and radio.

"I want to see again the places where I grew up, the people who touched and shaped my life. I want to thank these people," the pope said.

Naturally, the pope added, he also wants to express a message that goes beyond his native state of Bavaria. But when asked what the themes or issues would be, the pope said he hadn't really chosen any — it would be the liturgy that would suggest them.

"The basic theme is that we have to rediscover God, not just any God, but the God that has a human face, because when we see Jesus Christ we see God," he said.

Starting from that awareness, he said, people find a way to meet each other in the family, among generations and among cultures. The path to peaceful coexistence in today's world is essential, he said, but "we won't find it if we don't receive light from above."

In the same interview, the pope said he wanted to correct a widespread public opinion that Christianity is "a collection of prohibitions." The faith is above all a positive spiritual invitation, and that's the point he wants to get across, he said.

From his own words, then, it would appear the pope is going not to chastise his native culture but to awaken it.

There's no doubt in the pope's mind that Germany, like most of Western Europe, suffers from a form of "drastic secularization" that tends to exclude God. But rather than rail against this trend, the pope seems ready to explore it sympathetically, often from the point of view of the average person.

As he told the German journalists, "Finding God inside this world has become more difficult."

Typically, Pope Benedict believes that his numerous liturgies in Bavaria are the most eloquent and forceful way to get his "message" across. Throughout his 17 months as pope, he has laid considerably more

emphasis on the fundamentals of the faith and the importance of liturgical celebrations than on in-depth examination of social and political issues.

That is by design, too. The pope is convinced that Christianity as a force in the world begins with personal participation in Mass and a personal encounter with Christ.

In the recent interview, he said he hopes the German liturgies will help show that "believing is beautiful," that the church community possesses a transcendental strength, and that behind their belief lies something important.

The pope said one thing he hopes to communicate to young people in his homeland is that, despite the modern emphasis on personal freedom, they should not be afraid to make lifelong commitments like marriage or the priesthood.

In his one major encounter with the secular world, the pope will address academics at the University of Regensburg, where he once taught theology.

The pontiff will hold private talks with political leaders, and in arrival and departure ceremonies will have a chance to address national issues.

In his interview with German media, the pope was asked point-blank: What would you still like from Germans? He answered by speaking of a positive "inner transformation" of the German character since World War II, from reserved and disciplined to "spontaneous, happy and hospitable." His hope for Germany, he said, was that the Christian faith will help these virtues to grow.

Pope Benedict has given no indication that during his visit he will tackle contentious internal church issues like women's ordination, priestly celibacy and the admission of divorced and remarried Catholic to the sacraments. All were posed as challenges in a recent open letter to the pope by the lay group We Are Church, which originated in Austria and is popular in Germany.

Although We Are Church plans some protest vigils during the pope's stay, trip planners do not expect aggressive demonstrations like those carried out when Pope John Paul II made his last visit to the country in 1996.

Part of the reason may be that Pope Benedict is a native son, and the country is understandably proud to host him again. The pope has thanked Bavaria for the efforts being made for his visit, but sounded a little embarrassed, too.

"I blush when I think of all the preparations that are made for my visit, for everything that people do. My house was freshly painted, a professional school redid the fence. The evangelical professor helped to do the fence," he said.

"I find all of this extraordinary, and I don't think it's for me, but rather a sign of wanting to be part of this faith community and to serve one another," he said.

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