NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER DONATE NOW!
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Benedict XVI trying to meet the other Germany halfway

John L. Allen Jr. | Sep. 23, 2011

Children greet Pope Benedict XVI after his arrival at Tegel Airport in Berlin Sept. 22. (CNS/Reuters/Thomas Peter)

Pope Benedict XVI has gone home to Germany twice before, but it is always been, in a sense, on his turf. The first German pontiff in 500 years was surrounded by throngs of pumped-up young believers for World Youth Day in Cologne in 2005, and he took a trip down memory lane to ultra-Catholic Bavaria, where the young Joseph Ratzinger grew up, in 2006.

From Sept. 22-25, Benedict?s first official state visit to his native land is taking him to what one might call the ?other Germany,? if not several other Germanys: ultra-secular Berlin, today presided over by an openly gay mayor, and a Protestant stronghold in Erfurt where Martin Luther once studied for the priesthood. Both are environments where enthusiasm for the German pope is often mixed with controversy over his message.

Update: Pope meets abuse victims in Germany [1]

Even within the 30 percent of the national population of 82 million that is Catholic, another face of Germany is on display. German-speaking Catholicism has long been home to intense reform pressures, and groups such as ?We Are Church,? which favor measures such as optional priestly celibacy, the ordination of women, and less restrictive rules on intercommunion with Protestants, are making themselves heard.

To be sure, Benedict?s prominence still stirs considerable national pride. The Berlin headquarters of the country?s largest publishing house is displaying a massive blow-up of the front page from the day of his election to the papacy in April 2005, under the banner headline ?Wir Sind Papst!? (?We?re the Pope!?). A vocal group of young Catholics called ?Generation Benedict? is offering strong support.

Yet as he moves through his four-day program, Benedict is also set to confront both overt blowback -- one group of protesters in Berlin has vowed to make enough noise to keep him up at night -- and widespread indifference. A national poll says only 14 percent of Germans regarded the pope?s visit as ?personally important,? while 55 percent said it held ?no importance whatsoever.?

Benedict appears determined to meet his critics halfway. In his Sept. 22 speech to the national parliament, for

instance, the pontiff praised the country?s strong environmental movement -- even though several members of the Green Party were among some 100 parliamentarians who boycotted the address.

?The emergence of the ecological movement in German politics since the 1970s ... was and continues to be a cry for fresh air that must not be ignored or pushed aside, just because too much of it is seen to be irrational,? the pope said.

?Young people had come to realize that something is wrong in our relationship with nature, that matter is not just raw material for us to shape at will, but that the Earth has a dignity of its own and that we must follow its directives.?

Benedict argued that ecological consciousness could lead to a broad recovery of the idea of ?natural law,? meaning that moral rules are encoded into creation by God.

Germany?s experience under the Nazis, the pope said, is a harrowing example of what happens when politics and morality part company. Today, he warned, Europe may fall prey to ?extremist and radical movements? if it can?t defend cultural values rooted in its classical and Christian heritage.

?We are witnessing a growing indifference to religion in society, which considers the issue of truth as something of an obstacle in its decision-making, and instead gives priority to utilitarian considerations,? Benedict said in a welcoming ceremony at the residence of President Christian Wulff.

The meeting with the president is itself symbolic of some of tensions facing German Catholicism. Though Wulff is a practicing Catholic, he?s unable to receive Communion because he?s divorced and remarried under civil law.

Shortly before the pope?s arrival, Archbishop Robert Zollitsch of Freiburg, president of the German bishops? conference, called for ?intense discussion? around a more ?merciful? approach to pastoral care of divorced people. Wulff raised the issue in remarks to the pope: ?Many ask themselves how mercifully [the church] treats people who have suffered breakups in their own lives.?

Fallout from the sexual abuse crisis also clouds Benedict?s homecoming. Groups of victims and their advocates are organizing demonstrations during the papal visit, while census figures show that some 180,000 German Catholics abandoned the church during 2010 -- double the attrition of 2009, a result most observers attribute to the impact of the scandals.

In remarks aboard the papal plane, Benedict said, ?I can understand that in the face of such reports, people, especially those close to victims, would say, ?This isn?t my church anymore.? ?

No outing to German-speaking lands would be complete without hearing from Fr. Hans Küng, the pontiff?s former colleague as a professor of theology, and the church?s most prominent in-house critic. In vintage fashion, Küng told *Der Spiegel* on the eve of the trip that a cult of personality around the pope risks the ?Putinization? of the Catholic church.

During Benedict?s four days, the pontiff is expected to meet with local delegations of both Jews and Muslims, take part in an ecumenical prayer service with Lutherans, and preside over an open-air Mass in Berlin?s Olympic Stadium. Benedict is also scheduled to meet the Central Committee of German Catholics, widely considered one of the most powerful bodies of lay Catholics in the world.

[John L. Allen, Jr. is *NCR* senior correspondent. His e-mail address is jallen@ncronline.org]

The Next Step FORWARD [3]

DONATE NOW [3]

Enjoy this article?
Help support more like it by **donating today!** [3]

Source URL (retrieved on *05/05/2015 - 17:38*): http://ncronline.org/news/vatican/benedict-xvi-trying-meet-other-germany-halfway

Links:
[1] http://ncronline.org/node/26736
[2] http://ncrnews.org/webathon/donate/in-content
[3] http://ncrnews.org/webathon/donate/article-end