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Analysis: What's at stake in Pope Benedict XVI's visit to Philadelphia

David Gibson Religion News Service | Jun. 8, 2012

Pope Benedict XVI leaves his general audience Wednesday in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican. (CNS/Paul Haring)

Nearly lost amid ongoing reports about the Vatican leaks scandal, Rome's battle with American nuns, the American bishops' battle for religious freedom, and the priest on trial in Philadelphia, was the news that, by the way, Pope Benedict XVI plans to visit Philadelphia.

Benedict made the announcement at the end of his visit to Milan on Sunday for the church's triennial World Meeting of Families. The next meeting would be in Philadelphia in 2015, he said, and he planned to be there, "God willing."

True, the trip won't happen until 2015, and it may well not happen at all -- Benedict would be 88 by then. Even if there's a new pope in 2015, the City of Brotherly Love is still almost assured of getting a papal visit -- new popes like to underscore continuity, and respect the plans their predecessors had in place.

In a larger sense, the visit would be about more than promoting family life, and in many ways it's related to other Catholic issues now dominating the headlines. Here's why.

It's practical

Benedict's only other visit to the United States, in April 2008, was to New York and Washington. One might think that he would want to visit the South or West, where the Catholic flock is actually growing, and to give those folks there a chance to see the Holy Father.

But Philadelphia is on the Eastern seaboard, and about the closest point in the United States to Rome. That's no small consideration for a pope who has never been terribly vigorous and who now suffers from a painful arthritis-like condition that drains his energy.

The pope likely will face intense lobbying from U.S. bishops who want him to visit their diocese, too. While papal aides will try to resist such entreaties, another logical stop would be Baltimore -- the "mother church" of all U.S. dioceses -- and now headed by Archbishop William Lori, who has no small amount of influence in the hierarchy these days.

It's pastoral

Philadelphia's Catholics have been rocked by years of increasingly horrific revelations about sexual abuse by clergy, and the former head of priest personnel, Monsignor William J. Lynn, is awaiting a jury's verdict on whether he will be the first church official ever convicted for helping cover up for clergy molesters.

Moreover, the Philadelphia archdiocese -- one of the most storied and solidly Catholic in the nation -- faces an unprecedented wave of closures and mergers, as well as a sobering $12.3 million operating loss for the last fiscal year. Philadelphia's new archbishop, Charles J. Chaput, warned that those money troubles would mean a significantly downsized event -- a papal rally of just 60,000 to 80,000.

Chaput said Benedict still wanted to go because of what it could mean to the city's Catholics. "Philadelphia is in the midst of a very difficult time and I hope that (the 2015 meeting) will be a way of celebrating our commitment to be a church of the new evangelization that looks forward to the future with confidence and joy," Chaput said after he appeared with the pope in Milan.

It's personal

Chaput has emerged in recent years as a leading champion of the Vatican's "new evangelization" as he uses his bully pulpit to argue forcefully for a strong Catholic voice in the public square.

Chaput has also undertaken a number of sensitive missions for Rome: leading an investigation of an Australian bishop who was eventually sacked for his liberal views, and helping to clean up the conservative, scandal-plagued Legionaries of Christ order. This visit is a papal pat on the back for Chaput.

Will the visit help Chaput earn a cardinal's red hat? There are no guarantees, but retired Philadelphia Cardinal Justin Rigali would be 80 in 2015, making Chaput eligible -- and appealing.

It's political

Even if the trip does not come off, the image of Benedict standing next to the Liberty Bell or other icons the city of America's founding freedoms dovetail perfectly with the bishops' campaign for religious freedom, which they say is threatened by government policies like the health insurance mandate for birth control coverage.

The bishops' "Fortnight for Freedom," which runs June 21 to July 4, consciously tries to link the Catholic faith with the American founding, and the prospect of a papal visit to Philadelphia drives the point home.

"It's fitting that this gathering, which celebrates the cornerstone of society, will take place in America's cradle of freedom," Chaput said.

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