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Saturday, April 12, 2008

Pope may offer defining message in U.S.

American Catholics wait for cues from Benedict XVI's first visit to Washington and NYC.

Gregg Krupa / The Detroit News

As Pope Benedict XVI makes his first trip to the United States next week, many American Catholics and observers of other faiths are wondering how he will use his prominent pulpit to address a string of religious and secular issues affecting the lives of the faithful and the politics of the nation.

Emerging from the shadow of his compelling predecessor, Pope John Paul II, the reserved, scholarly Benedict will arrive Tuesday and spend five days in Washington and New York. His trip comes amid a decline in the number of priests and nuns, disaffection caused by sex scandals and divisions based on faith that have replaced the ideological struggle of the Cold War.

"We will learn a lot about this pope by the way he chooses to use the spotlight here, in the United States," said the Rev. John Staudenmaier, an assistant to the president at the University of Detroit Mercy.

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"What is his sense of the domestic health of the church in the United States? That should become clear when he speaks to the bishops from across the country Wednesday in Washington. And I can imagine him using these various stages to issue a notable statement on global affairs, like refugees, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the turmoil in a fair number of African countries, along with torture and terrorism."

Close observers of the papacy say Benedict is likely to challenge Catholics and provide moral guidance for the most powerful nation in the world. While he has stressed the fundamentals of Catholic doctrine and criticized the secularism of the West, he also has proven to be far warmer than the stern visage he

presented as the Vatican's enforcer, in his previous role as the prefect for the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith.

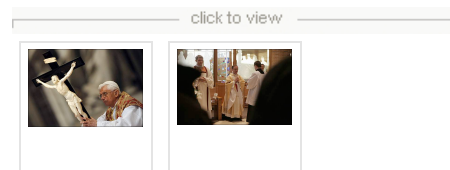
But many observers say he has yet to answer a central question: Is this elderly, bookish man content with treading water in the wake of the seminal papacy of his predecessor, or is he, like John Paul, capable of raising a torch bright enough to light the way for his followers and millions of others?

Some believe a decidedly assertive Benedict is about to emerge.

"In the context of the United States, frankly, the main reason he is coming is to speak to the United Nations, not to see George Bush," said the Rev. Thomas Reese, senior fellow at the Woodstock Theological Center at Georgetown University. "And I think his message is going to be that international relations should be governed not just by military might and economic power, but it should be guided by ethical principles and



Observers expect Pope Benedict XVI, here at a Good Friday service, to emerge from the shadow of his popular predecessor. (Andreas Solaro / Getty Images)



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About the trip

Highlights of the pope's visit to Washington and New York City. He arrives in Washington on Tuesday.

Wednesday: Pope Benedict XVI becomes the second pope to visit the White House, where he meets President Bush. Later, he meets with 350 American bishops.

Thursday: He says Mass at Nationals Park, addresses the heads of 250 Catholic colleges and universities and 195 Catholic school superintendents. Later, he meets with Jews, Muslims, Sikhs, Hindus, Buddhists and others at the Pope John Paul II Cultural Center.

Friday: Addresses the United Nations

moral values."

Catholics say they also yearn for words of encouragement: for overworked, undervalued priests; for the laity, whose role is increasingly integral to parishes, churches and schools; and for lapsed Catholics whose beliefs were challenged by unbridled secularism.

"We know we have had some crises in the church in America," said the Rev. Miroslaw Krol, dean of human formation at SS. Cyril & Methodius Seminary, in Orchard Lake. "The church in the United States needs to be kind of united again, and the pope is the one to refresh our faith and bring us together again."

"What happens in America is that we have a lot of believers, but we do not have enough priests and pastors," said Sebastian Zielinski, a seminarian at SS. Cyril & Methodius, who will meet with the pope at a seminary in Yonkers, N.Y., on Saturday. "I think it is very important that he make a statement in regard to strengthening vocations."

Although the pope will not travel to Detroit, institutions and people from the metropolitan area will play central roles.

About 400 local residents will participate in the events under the auspices of the Archdiocese of Detroit. They include Cardinal Adam Maida, the Archbishop of Detroit; priests; nuns; seminarians; and parishioners. And at Pope John Paul II Cultural Center -- founded by Maida -- in Washington on Thursday, interfaith leaders from across the country will gather to pray, including Imam Sayid Hassan al-Qazwini, the leader of the largest mosque in America, the Islamic Center of America in Dearborn, and Victor Ghalib Begg, chairman of the Council of Islamic Organizations in Michigan.

"The Holy Father is implementing the command of Christ to go throughout the world and baptize in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit," said Maida, who is particularly proud of the focus on the center he helped establish to honor John Paul II. "He has a mandate to preach the gospel of Jesus, the gospel of love and peace."

Qazwini and Begg said meeting with the pope is an important opportunity for Muslims.

"If someone is open to you, you have to rush to him," Begg said. "We need that these days, very much. Sometimes this pope has been a little difficult for us to understand, but we have a very long-term dialogue with Catholics here in the Midwest."

The pope already has enjoyed some success in spreading the gospel.

Students at Notre Dame Preparatory School in Pontiac completed more than 15,000 hours of community service, including working with victims of HIV in Uganda and Tanzania, to offer as a birthday present to Benedict on Wednesday.

"I saw great suffering in the slums," said Jenna Zent, 17, of Lake Orion, who returned from Kampala, Uganda, Tuesday. "The houses are made out of cardboard; the doors are made out of ragged sheets.

"I think the service hours are a really great gift for the pope, and I was honored to do it."

Others in Metro Detroit encourage the pope to assert himself on political issues. About 50 local Catholics were among 1,522 to sign a letter to Benedict last month, urging him to tell President Bush the war in Iraq is unjust in the eyes of the church.

"It's just a great opportunity for the Holy Father to set before the president the need to disengage from Iraq and let the Iraqi people come together to solve their own problems without the occupation of the U.S. armed forces," said Bishop Thomas Gumbleton, a signatory. "The pope spoke out strongly against the war when he was Cardinal Ratzinger. Some church leaders, on the other hand, have not been as vocal as they have been on some other moral issues."

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