

Evangelization's source: Pope's journey to Croatia highlights family



The focus of Pope Benedict XVI's trip to Zagreb, Croatia, June 4-5 will be on the family and building a community with Christian values.

In the 84-year-old pope's 19th trip abroad and his 13th to a European country, he also will continue to underline the importance he places on reviving Europe's Christian roots.

Even though Croatia is an overwhelmingly Catholic country, it has undergone hardships that have tested its foothold on faith: two World Wars, a Nazi invasion and then communist rule under the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.

Today, threats continue, but under a different guise, said the spokesman of the Croatian bishops' conference.

"Croatia is not an island and as such is facing all of the challenges that are prevalent in western countries," said the spokesman, Zvonimir Ancic. First among them is "a rampant secularism whose small, but very vocal proponents, with the backing of the majority of the mass media, are actively trying to deconstruct all elements of Croatia's traditional Catholic identity, he said in an email response to questions.

Major challenges facing the church in Croatia include the country's "very liberal law regulating abortion," and proposed measures to legalize adoption for same-sex couples, as well as fresh debates over euthanasia, he said.

Twenty years after it declared independence, Croatia is set to join the European Union this year.

Pope Benedict is concerned that as Croatia joins the larger political and economic arena, it does not lose its own religious and cultural identity, but rather bring its Christian values to a wider forum.

Croatia is a different country from the one Blessed Pope John Paul II visited in 1994, 1998 and 2003.

The late pope went at critical moments in Croatia's evolution: first as the country was engaged in its 1991-1995 war of independence from Yugoslavia, and then as it sought to rebuild a democratic nation that was still scarred by religious and ethnic tensions.

Blessed John Paul told the nation in 2003 that Christianity was the answer to its challenges because it offers nations the solid foundations of universally shared values, such as respect for human life and dignity, religious freedom and solidarity -- a message that Pope Benedict will likely repeat.

Croatia is holding its first national meeting of Catholic families this year and the pope will celebrate

Mass on "National Family Day" June 5.

The Croatian bishops chose "Together with Christ" as the theme of the visit to underline the importance of creating a community that has eternal Christian values as its foundation.

The theme, according to the official missal prepared for the trip, is meant to help people look toward the future and "the requirements of the new evangelization, which begins first of all within Christian families."

Ancic said the pope will help "encourage and uplift sometimes-tired spirits," give momentum to the faithful during these challenging times and instill fresh hope in those suffering from the ongoing economic recession.

The pope's 33-hour stay in Croatia's capital will hit the basics: meetings and events with the country's government, academic and business leaders, young people, families and religious. He will give a total of six speeches and one homily.

After meeting the country's president and prime minister in the morning June 4 and academic, political, business and religious leaders in the afternoon, the pope will take part in a prayer vigil with young people in the city's Ban Josip Jelacic Square.

A key feature of the youth gathering is meant to be silent prayer -- an unusual expectation when there are likely to be thousands of young people gathered in one spot on a summer's evening.

Silence "speaks of the divine presence," the missal said, "and to be silent in a city square where normally there is nothing but noise becomes and remains a strong sign of the Christian presence in the world."

The high point of the trip will be the June 5 morning Mass with families in Zagreb's hippodrome, the same giant stadium where Blessed John Paul celebrated Mass during his visit in 1994.

The pope also will visit to the tomb of a controversial Croatian cardinal, Blessed Cardinal Alojzije Stepinac. A storm of debate erupted in the run-up to Blessed Pope John Paul's beatification of the cardinal in Zagreb in 1998.

Serbian Orthodox and some Jewish groups have questioned the late cardinal's allegiances during World War II, with many accusing him of being a Nazi sympathizer.

When the Yugoslavian communist government took over after the war, it sentenced Blessed Stepinac to jail for collaborating with the puppet regime. He died under house arrest in 1960 and was declared a martyr of the church in 1998.

For Croats, the cardinal is the symbol of the church's resistance to communist oppression. Blessed John Paul said the cardinal was persecuted because he refused to break the Yugoslavian church's allegiance to the Vatican by setting up a national Catholic Church.

Today, the cardinal is still seen as a powerful example of staying true to God and respecting the dignity of every human being, the trip's missal said.

By praying at his tomb, Pope Benedict will be reinforcing the cardinal as a role model of patient perseverance and trust in God while undergoing great difficulties and hardship.

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