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Pope Benedict XVI visits his Native Bavaria (September 10, 2006)

Die Zeit, a liberal weekly, reports on the emotional second visit of Pope Benedict XVI to his native Bavaria. There, he appealed to several hundred thousand faithful, asking them to turn back to God and show more tolerance toward other religions.

An Admonition to Reverence

250,000 people attended the papal mass on Sunday. The pontiff called for a return to Christian values.

On the first stop of his celebrated visit to Bavaria, Pope Benedict XVI denounced the loss of faith in the West and called for a return to Christian values. On Sunday, during an open-air mass before a crowd of 250,000 in Munich, he simultaneously admonished science and the media, calling on both to show reverence for “what is sacred to others.” In an indirect allusion to the cartoon controversy* and stem cell research, the Pope spoke out against a “cynicism that regards mocking the sacred as an exercise of freedom and considers utility the supreme criterion for the future of scientific research.”

More than 100 cardinals and bishops attended the mass. Under glorious sunshine, the faithful had already begun fêting the Pope with applause, cheers, and calls of “Benedetto” upon his arrival at the Munich fair grounds and during his subsequent drive in the popemobile through the crowded ranks. The first visitors had arrived at around midnight.

In his homily, however, Benedict XVI also criticized the Catholic Church in Germany, which he said was more engaged in social projects in Africa and Asia than in missionary work there. “Social issues and the Gospel are inseparable,” he admonished his listeners. “The world needs God. We need God.”

After his arrival on Saturday, the Pope called upon Germans to better integrate their Muslim fellow citizens and gave a surprising signal for ecumenicism: “[W]e will be committed, with heart

* The controversy started in September 2005 when a Danish newspaper published a group of cartoons depicting the prophet Mohammed. The cartoons unleashed widespread protest in the Muslim world and sparked a debate about artistic expression, censorship, freedom of religion, and respect for religion, among other issues – eds.

and reason, to drawing closer to one another.” Before that, President Horst Köhler had used his welcoming speech to express a wish for rapprochement between the Protestant and Catholic Churches.

Especially in Germany, the land of the Reformation, many Christians long for ecumenical progress, said the Protestant Köhler. “That which unites us is so much greater than that which divides us.” The Pope responded, departing from his prepared remarks: “With your words . . . you have interpreted the sentiments of my own heart.” But 500 years of division cannot simply be set aside. The church lay movement “Wir sind Kirche” [“We are Church”] appealed to the Pope to let his words be followed by deeds.

After an evening meeting with Benedict XVI, Chancellor Angela Merkel (CDU) said she had promised the pontiff to work on behalf of shared Christian values in Europe during Germany’s upcoming EU presidency.

On Saturday, Köhler had welcomed Benedict XVI at the Munich airport with military honors as the head of the Vatican State. He was setting foot on Bavarian soil “with great emotion,” said the Pope. Merkel and Bavarian Minister President Edmund Stoiber (CSU), as well as Munich’s archbishop, Cardinal Friedrich Wetter, and the chairman of the German Conference of Bishops, Cardinal Karl Lehmann, also attended the welcoming ceremony. The Tegernsee *Gebirgsschützen*, of which the Pope is an honorary member, fired the salute.

After his drive from the airport to downtown Munich, Benedict XVI led a prayer in front of the Mariensäule [Column of the Madonna] on Marienplatz. Visibly moved, he sang along with the Ave Maria and the Bavarian hymn. Joseph Ratzinger had prayed at this column thirty years earlier when he became Archbishop of Munich, and then once again when John Paul II called him to Rome to be the Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

At the beginning of the Pope's visit there had been fears about traffic chaos, but they didn’t pan out. “It would be a dream for the police if everyone at large events behaved with such discipline,” said a police spokesman. However, according to the police only about 150,000 people came on Saturday to welcome the pontiff. Organizers spoke of around 250,000.

On Monday, Benedict XVI continued his trip with a visit to the largest German Marian pilgrimage site in Germany, Altötting, and to his birthplace, Markt. During the night from Saturday to Sunday, unknown persons had thrown two paint pouches at the façade of Ratzinger’s birth house. A painter quickly removed the splotches, however.

Three hundred and fifty thousand people are expected at the mass in Regensburg on Tuesday; Ratzinger once taught theology in the university town. Wednesday is reserved for the private portion of the visit. He will fly back to Rome on Thursday, after a prayer at the Freising cathedral, where Benedict XVI was consecrated to the priesthood fifty-five years ago.

Source: "Mahnung zur Ehrfurcht" ["An Admonition to Reverence"], ZEIT online, September 10, 2006.