

Benedict's first visit to U.S. as pope features diverse encounters

VATICAN CITY – Pope Benedict XVI's first visit to the United States as head of the Catholic Church features a diverse series of encounters with government leaders, interreligious and ecumenical representatives, the academic world and the Catholic faithful.

The pope's events in Washington and New York April 15-20 include a meeting with President George W. Bush at the White House and a visit to ground zero in lower Manhattan.

His address to the United Nations April 18 will be the international highlight of the trip, offering the pope the most significant global platform to date in his three-year pontificate.

It will be Pope Benedict's eighth foreign trip and the first papal visit to the United States since Pope John Paul II made a 30-hour visit to St. Louis in 1999.

U.S. organizers report a high demand for tickets for the two papal Masses, to be celebrated in Nationals Park in Washington and Yankee Stadium in New York.

At the Vatican, too, the excitement is building for what church officials say could be the most important papal trip in years.

Here is how the pope's itinerary will unfold:

Tuesday, April 15

The pope is expected to arrive at Andrews Air Force Base outside Washington in the late afternoon after a nine-hour flight on his chartered Alitalia jet. He will be greeted by Bush and the first lady, as well as by local church dignitaries, and both the pope and the president are expected to make brief remarks. Afterward, the pope will go to the apostolic nunciature, the Vatican's version of an embassy, to rest.

Wednesday, April 16

Bush welcomes the pope on the south lawn of the White House at 10:30 a.m., then the two leaders go inside for private talks. It's only the second time in history that a pope has visited the White House, and it takes place on the pope's 81st birthday.

At 5:30 p.m., the pope presides over a prayer service with about 350 U.S. bishops at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception. Before the service, the pope will greet well-wishers outside.

Thursday, April 17

At 10 a.m., the pope celebrates Mass in Nationals Park, the first nonbaseball event at the new stadium.

At 5 p.m., the pope addresses the heads of more than 200 U.S. Catholic colleges and universities at The Catholic University of America in Northeast Washington. Also attending will be school superintendents from U.S. dioceses.

At 6:30 p.m., the pope will join Buddhists, Muslims, Jews, Sikhs, Hindus and representatives of other religions for a meeting at the Pope John Paul II Cultural Center.

Friday, April 18

After flying from Washington to New York, the pope addresses the U.N. General Assembly at 10:45 a.m. He's continuing a papal tradition: Pope John Paul II visited the United Nations twice, in 1979 and 1995, and Pope Paul VI did so in 1965.

At 6 p.m., the pope holds a prayer service with representatives of other Christian denominations at St. Joseph Church, a historic German parish in the Yorkville section of Manhattan.

Saturday, April 19

At 9:15 a.m., the pope celebrates Mass in St. Patrick's Cathedral in midtown Manhattan for priests, deacons and members of religious orders. The day marks the third anniversary of the pope's election.

At 4:30 p.m., the pope presides over an encounter with young people at St. Joseph

Seminary in Yonkers, north of New York City. The pope will meet with about 50 disabled youths, then speak to several thousand young people – including hundreds of seminarians – at what's being described as a rally/prayer service.

Sunday, April 20

At 9:30 a.m., the pope will visit ground zero, the site of the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center.

At 2:30 p.m., the pope will celebrate Mass in Yankee Stadium. The liturgy will commemorate the 200th anniversaries of the archdioceses of New York, Boston, Philadelphia and Louisville, Ky., as well as the elevation of Baltimore – the diocese from which the new sees were created – to an archdiocese.

The pope departs John F. Kennedy International Airport at 8 p.m. on Shepherd One, his chartered Alitalia jet.

Even for those who can't get into papal events, there will be opportunities to at least see the pontiff. Vatican officials are bringing over a glass-walled popemobile and plan to use it at some point in both cities.