

# No free-for-all: Papal visits follow tight framework

VATICAN CITY – When Pope Benedict XVI sits down with interreligious leaders in Washington April 17, the participants will follow a set program that leaves little room for surprises.

Likewise, the pope's meeting the next day in New York with ecumenical representatives features prayers, talks and symbolic gestures, but not free-ranging dialogue.

Those who have followed papal trips for years know that this is how it's always been. With rare exceptions, a pope's events are highly structured – and there are good reasons for that, according to his aides.

"In the interreligious encounter, for example, it would be impossible to hold a wide-open discussion, which really requires an open-ended time frame," said Jesuit Father Federico Lombardi, papal spokesman.

What the pope brings to interfaith and ecumenical events are principles, directions and impetus, but not a detailed analysis or proposals.

"All these meetings are very important, particularly for the symbolic value and the messages that they send. But getting into the actual nitty-gritty of development of dialogue is not possible at encounters like this," said Mercy Sister Mary Ann Walsh, director of media relations for the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

The pope's events during his April 15-20 visit to the United States were designed far in advance. For the most part, the format is formal, and the pope won't be wading into crowds campaign-style or fielding impromptu questions from his audience.

Unless, of course, Pope Benedict surprises everyone – including his own trip planners.

That almost never happens. Even Pope John Paul II, known for his stage presence

and ability to spontaneously connect with people, usually stuck to the playbook on foreign trips. Even his occasional surprise drop-ins on African villages were prepared somewhat in advance, so security could be in place and the hosts could put the teakettle on.

When a pope gives a speech on foreign trips, he rarely strays from his prepared text. One reason is that off-the-cuff changes would throw a wrench into the gears of the Vatican's communications machinery, which prepares texts and translations several days in advance for fast distribution.

At the Vatican, Pope Benedict has impressed reporters and others with his spontaneous remarks during papal audiences. Twice a year, he holds lengthy meetings with priests and fields their questions one after another, in what have been some of the most insightful encounters of his pontificate.

Why not have a bit of this give-and-take on his trips abroad? For one thing, Father Lombardi said, it would be time-consuming.

"A papal trip is always a precise series of appointments, and the pope has a limited amount of time at each event. That's not very suitable for informal question-and-answer sessions," he said.

"And if the pope lingers with one group, it could be taken as a lack of respect toward the next group," he said.

Unscripted moments do occur during papal trips. Sometimes they're beautiful, and sometimes they're not.

Children eluding guards for a papal hug - as happened more than once to Pope John Paul - are a photographer's delight.

When Pope John Paul visited Australia in 1986, one of the most successful events came when he answered rapid-fire questions from fourth-graders.

Less rewarding was the bitter back and forth that broke out during Pope John Paul's interfaith meeting in the Holy Land in 2000, when Jewish and Muslim representatives argued vocally about the status of Jerusalem.

Those delivering talks to the pope at his various venues usually have some guidance from local church officials, but their speeches are not routinely vetted at the Vatican beforehand, said Father Lombardi.

Vatican officials still remember when, during Pope John Paul's first trip to the United States in 1979, Mercy Sister Theresa Kane stood up at a papal encounter with women religious and raised the issue of women's ordination.

On one of his trips to Africa, where local speeches were sometimes handwritten on scraps of paper, Pope John Paul heard a bluntly worded appeal for greater lay input into the local church, as well as a frank assessment of relations with the Vatican.

The late pope took it all in and remarked at the end of the visit, "I have been edified by you all."

Vatican officials said Pope Benedict will likewise be paying close attention to what people have to say in the United States.

"This pope is a great listener," Father Lombardi said.