

Octogenarian plus: At 83, things are getting busy for Pope Benedict

VATICAN CITY - Almost lost in the recent furor over clerical sex abuse is that Pope Benedict XVI just turned 83 and is approaching one of the busiest stretches of his pontificate.

At an age when most church officials have long retired, over the next six months the German pontiff will make six trips, preside over dozens of public liturgies, close the Year for Priests, chair a Synod of Bishops on the Middle East and keep up a steady stream of audiences, both public and private.

A major document on Scripture in church life is expected before summer. In his spare moments - which are few - the pope is still working on his second volume of "Jesus of Nazareth."

Recent media reports have drawn a portrait of a weary pope, overwhelmed by the onslaught of criticism over the church's handling of sex abuses cases. Yet on the public stage, Pope Benedict has shown few signs of succumbing to job fatigue.

In Malta in mid-April for a 27-hour visit, he appeared to nod off for a few seconds during Mass. But although that moment was well photographed, it was the exception to the rule. Throughout the visit, he appeared happy and relaxed - notably as he chatted with young people aboard a boat in Valletta's Grand Harbor. If the story line was a dispirited pope alarmed by a drop in approval ratings, he clearly wasn't following the script.

Nor is the pope about to go into hiding. There's far too much on his schedule.

A typical week in late April, for example, included four days of private talks with African bishops, speeches to new ambassadors, a meeting with a prime minister, commemoration of the church's annual vocations day, a general audience talk, another talk at his Sunday blessing and a speech to Catholic digital media experts in Italy.

Oh yes, and a brief celebration of the fifth anniversary of the official start of his pontificate.

In May, things will get really busy. He will travel to northern Italy May 2 to see the Shroud of Turin, a visit that includes four other major events and speeches: a meeting with Turin residents, Mass in a main square of the city, a meeting with young people and an encounter with the sick.

The pope will travel to Portugal May 11-14, visiting the Marian shrine of Fatima as well as the capital of Lisbon and the city of Porto. The pope could have made this an overnight stop in Fatima, but he broadened the trip because he wants to deliver a message on Christian values to the wider society at a time when the country appears ready to legalize same-sex marriage.

Back in Rome, he will celebrate Mass at St. Peter's Basilica for Pentecost May 23. In early June, he will mark the feast of Corpus Christi with Mass and a procession through Rome. Then on June 4-6 he will head to Cyprus, where he will meet with church leaders of the Middle East. The next weekend, he will preside over a vigil and Mass June 10-11 at the Vatican to close the Year for Priests; thousands of priests from around the world are expected to attend.

Later in June, he will ordain priests in a lengthy Mass in St. Peter's Basilica. He then will mark the feast of Sts. Peter and Paul with two liturgies, evening prayer at the Basilica of St. Paul Outside the Walls June 28 and Mass the next day in St. Peter's Basilica, where he will present palliums to new metropolitan archbishops.

Things usually slow down in summer, but not as much this year. The pope has announced he won't be taking a real vacation in the northern Italian mountains. Insiders say he wants to spend more time writing, and he can get more done at his villa outside Rome. Volume 2 of "Jesus of Nazareth" is overdue, and the pope would like to put the final touches on the book over the summer, if not before.

In September, which used to be a slow month for popes, Pope Benedict will travel to England and Scotland on what could be his most challenging trip of the year. It's a four-day visit, and already the events are piling up: the beatification of Cardinal John Henry Newman, a major address at Westminster Hall in London, where St. Thomas

More was put on trial; liturgies in London and Glasgow; and an encounter with Anglican Archbishop Rowan Williams of Canterbury.

Closer to home, the pope will travel to central Italy in July to mark the eighth centenary of the birth of St. Celestine V – who is best known as one of the few popes in history to have resigned.

That will no doubt stir the imaginations of journalists. Expect to read lots of stories on whether Pope Benedict might resign. He has given no indication that abdication is even a remote possibility, and his health appears good. But people remember that in 2002, then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger said rather bluntly of the ailing Pope John Paul II, “If he were to see that he absolutely could not (continue), then he certainly would resign.”

As he turned 83, Pope Benedict looked as though he could keep up the pace indefinitely. Only one pope has lived longer in the past century – Pope John Paul II, who was 84 when he died.