

# Planning papal trips takes diplomacy, collaboration, fine-tuning

VATICAN CITY - For the Vatican, preparing a papal trip is a lengthy exercise in diplomatic skill, ecclesial collaboration and logistical fine-tuning.

After putting together more than 130 such journeys over the last 30 years, it's become a familiar drill for the handful of men charged with the task.

But as many trips prove, not everything can be planned for.

Pope Benedict XVI's April visit to the United States began taking shape last year, but the idea had been floating around since 2006, when Cardinal William H. Keeler invited the pontiff to come to Baltimore for the rededication of the city's cathedral.

That did not happen, but eventually a new trip itinerary focused on the United Nations, with additional events in New York City and Washington.

A papal visit typically begins with invitations from the country's government and bishops' conference. If a major international agency like the United Nations is involved, a third invitation is needed.

Merely asking the pope to come does not guarantee a visit, but it puts it on the Vatican's radar. In theory, the pope is willing to go anywhere and meet with government leaders, but if local bishops think it would be inopportune, the trip is likely to end up on the back burner.

Pope John Paul II, at the request of South Africa's bishops, refused to make an official visit to that country until the end of apartheid - although his plane once was forced down there briefly by a storm.

The timing of any papal visit is important. Although Pope Benedict has been invited to visit Israel, for example, the continued Israeli-Palestinian impasse has not made

the trip a priority.

The pope – aware that photo ops with government hosts are subject to partisan exploitation or can simply give the wrong impression during an election campaign – also tries to avoid showing up too close to political elections.

Once a date for a visit is established, the Vatican looks at the itinerary proposed by church and civil leaders in the host country. Almost always, it's a matter of paring down the cities on the list. The pope makes the final decision, based on the recommendations of his aides.

With Pope Benedict, the Vatican has been pretty adamant about keeping the number of stops to a minimum. Of Pope Benedict's seven foreign trips to date, five have involved only one or two cities.

Once the itinerary has been decided, a Vatican advance team makes an initial trip to the host country for preliminary talks on events and logistics. The Vatican's chief planner is Alberto Gasbarri, a top official of Vatican Radio and a fixture on papal trips for many years.

The Vatican team works out most of the preparation with officials of the bishops' conference and local dioceses, although items like security and transportation are coordinated with government representatives.

These initial sessions often focus on how many papal events will be loaded onto each day. Again, the list of requests often must be whittled down. In Pope John Paul's barnstorming days, seven or eight events per day were not unusual, but the pace slowed greatly in his later years. For Pope Benedict, who will turn 81 during the U.S. trip, the Vatican tries to limit events to two public appearances per day.

The Vatican's advance team travels to each city on the papal route and usually will return two or three times before the pope's arrival. Team members review the events proposed by local church planners and help fine-tune the details, giving careful attention to such things as transportation and lodging for the pope, his entourage and the papal press corps.

The planning gets very specific, involving details such as whether the pope will ride

in a closed car or popemobile to reach a venue, or how many steps the pope may have to walk when he gets there.

Sometimes the seemingly smallest item is bigger than it looks. When Pope John Paul went to Greece in 2001, for example, his chair had to be exactly as high as the chair of his Orthodox host, in order not to upset the ecumenical balance.

Particular attention is given to how much the pope will interact personally with crowds during the visit. Vatican planners know that too much crowd immersion can tire a pope, but they also do not want the pope to be isolated from the people who came to see him.

Security is handled primarily by the host government, but in coordination with a Vatican security team of six or seven agents who travel with the pope throughout the visit.

Liturgical elements depend largely on the local church, working in coordination with the Vatican. About six weeks before each visit, the Vatican's liturgist - now Monsignor Guido Marini - personally visits the Mass sites to go over final details.

As for papal speeches and homilies, the local church proposes themes, and the pope prepares them himself, assisted by officials of the Vatican's Secretariat of State. The texts are generally delivered in the language of the host country, but are translated ahead of time in two or three languages, always including Italian and English.

The Vatican makes about 60-70 places available for journalists on the papal flight and arranges their lodging and transportation to events. A papal entourage of 25-30 officials is also on the plane, and similar arrangements must be made for them.

Despite all the planning, something unexpected always happens.

That's not necessarily bad. During Pope John Paul's visit to Mozambique in 1988, for example, two rag-clad street children wandered onto the papal stage and stood next to the pontiff's throne. Before anyone could usher them off, the pope gave them a big hug.