

Pope hopes trip to France encourages awareness of Mary

VATICAN CITY – Pope Benedict XVI said he hoped his first trip to France as pope would encourage greater awareness of Mary as a beacon of hope for all people, especially the young.

The pope said he was traveling to France as a “messenger of peace and fraternity” and that he would offer a special prayer during his visit for the sick, the weak and the cause of peace in the world.

The pope made the remarks at the end of his weekly general audience Sept. 10, two days before leaving for a Sept. 12-15 visit to Paris and the Marian sanctuaries at Lourdes.

The pope noted that he was no stranger to France, having visited there many times as a cardinal. He praised the “solidity of its Christian faith and its high human and spiritual culture” and said he was sure he would be welcomed in the country’s traditional spirit of tolerance.

In celebrating the 150th anniversary of the Marian apparitions to St. Bernadette Soubirous in Lourdes, the pope said he hoped to underline Mary’s importance in the lives of all Christians today.

“May Mary be for all of you, especially for the young, the mother who is always available to meet the needs of her children, a light of hope that brightens and guides your paths,” he said.

During his visit, the pope was to hold meetings in Paris with French political leaders, including President Nicolas Sarkozy, and celebrate an outdoor Mass in one of the city’s squares.

Vatican officials said one of the most important events on the papal schedule in Paris was his Sept. 12 address at the College des Bernardins, which was to be attended by academics and cultural leaders, Muslim representatives, and officials of the

European Union and UNESCO.

Jesuit Father Federico Lombardi, Vatican spokesman, said the pope had spent considerable effort in personally preparing this speech, which was expected to focus on a major theme of his pontificate, the relationship between faith and modern culture.

At Lourdes, the pope was to join in several events of the jubilee pilgrimage, and Sept. 14 he was to celebrate Mass to mark the 150th anniversary of the apparitions.

On Sept. 15, the final day of the visit, he was to celebrate a Mass with the sick at Lourdes and administer the sacrament of the anointing of the sick to 15 people.

Cardinal Andre Vingt-Trois of Paris predicted the French people would get to know Pope Benedict as a man of “welcome and dialogue” during his visit. Many in the country have a caricature image of the German pontiff that will no doubt be corrected, he said.