

Some may protest, but young will welcome pope in Spain, spokesman says

VATICAN CITY - Protests planned against Pope Benedict XVI's visit to Madrid Aug. 18-21 are "not worrying or surprising" to the Vatican, particularly because "there are hundreds of thousands of young people who will be happy to welcome the pope," the Vatican spokesman said.

Groups opposed to government and church spending for the pope's visit have planned a protest Aug. 16, the opening day of World Youth Day.

Briefing reporters Aug. 12 about the papal trip, Jesuit Father Federico Lombardi said, "It seems to me that before every papal trip there are demonstrations by people who have a different opinion and use the occasion to express their problems or concerns It's part of life in a democratic country."

Father Lombardi also acknowledged the failure of efforts to keep the location of the next World Youth Day secret until Pope Benedict announces it at the final Mass Aug. 21.

He told reporters that at the end of the Mass, young people from Spain will pass the World Youth Day cross to their peers from Brazil, who will host the gathering in Rio de Janeiro in 2013. The Vatican decided not to wait three years for the international gathering because in 2014 Brazil is scheduled to host the World Cup soccer tournament and will have its hands full.

Father Lombardi also said that with 800 bishops registered, one-fifth of the world's active bishops will be in Madrid. Baltimore Archbishop Edwin F. O'Brien is expected to be among them.

The spokesman said that among the meetings, Masses and prayer services the pope will have in Madrid, one of the most striking is likely to be the Way of the Cross prayer service Aug. 19.

A series of sculptures used in Holy Week processions in several Spanish cities will be set up along a major Madrid street. Young people representing nations or groups of people suffering, either because of natural disasters or human action, will carry a cross from station to station. Young people from the Holy Land, Rwanda and Haiti – among others – will be joined by those who are unemployed, are recovering from addiction or who volunteer to assist people living with HIV and AIDS, Father Lombardi said.

The meditations, written by Sisters of the Cross in Seville, will be read over a loudspeaker and include explicit acknowledgments of those who suffer. The introduction of the text said the idea is to let them know Jesus is with them, “he takes on their pain and walks at their side.”

The meditations offer prayers for peace, for those who are discriminated against because of their faith, for immigrants and for those addicted to alcohol, drugs and other substances. They remember the unemployed and those who work to defend the life of the unborn.

The end of the ninth station – Jesus Is Stripped of his Garments – says, “Jesus suffers with all those who are victims of human genocide where brutal violence explodes, or victims of rape and sexual abuse, affecting children and adults. How many people are stripped of their dignity, of their innocence, of their trust in man?”