

Students pledge 500,000-plus community service hours

WASHINGTON - More than 500,000 community service hours have been pledged by Catholic school students and other Catholic youths in honor of Pope Benedict XVI's 81st birthday.

The pope's birthday is April 16, the second day of his six-day visit to the United States.

Washington Archbishop Donald W. Wuerl, announced the number of pledged hours March 25 during opening remarks at the National Catholic Educational Association's convention in Indianapolis.

"We're still working on the details, but we hope to present these hours to the Holy Father in a public forum during his visit and we're confident that this will be a gift that he will long remember and treasure," the archbishop said.

The project is called "Birthday Blessings for Pope Benedict XVI: A Gift of Public Service From U.S. Catholic Youth and Students." It includes service projects conducted between Feb. 25 and May 31.

NCEA has established a Web site, <https://ncea.catholic.org>, to help schools, parishes and individuals learn more about the effort and to register their volunteer hours. Students must register for the project through an online pledge form by April 11; hours are to be completed by May 31. Pledged service hours and hours already completed will be tallied and indicated on a document to be presented to the pope during his U.S. visit.

Students choose how to spend their volunteer hours. Acts of service are broadly defined as anything that helps another person or improves the environment. Students are encouraged to conduct canned food drives, visit nursing homes, write letters to those in military service or to shut-ins, raise money for a charity or clean up a local park.

The project's Web site is gathering information about the number of participants, the total hours volunteered and the kind of service provided. A running tally of the number of participants and the total number of hours pledged are displayed on the site.

"Without doubt, community service is a hallmark of our schools, colleges and religious education programs," said Karen Ristau, NCEA president. "In giving this service to the Holy Father, Catholic educators not only will present a most worthwhile tribute - but the nature of the gift underscores the great foundation of Catholic education, rooted in civic engagement," she said.