

Theme ‘Christ our Hope’ prepares us to welcome the Holy Father

Pope Benedict XVI’s upcoming apostolic journey to the United States will soon make headlines, locally, nationally and internationally. How will we, the Catholic faithful, welcome and celebrate the presence of the successor of St. Peter among us? Why do we look forward to the pope’s April 15-20 visit to Washington and New York as so much more than a media event? How might this papal visit become an occasion of grace for each one of us personally and for the Church in America – a moment of intense faith, greater charity and renewed hope?

St. Benedict in his famous monastic Rule offers profound insight into Christian hospitality when he writes, “all guests who present themselves are to be welcomed as Christ.” To welcome any guest – rich or poor, illustrious or unknown – is to welcome Christ himself. And to receive Pope Benedict XVI as a special guest is to welcome the successor of the one chosen to represent Christ as visible head of the Church.

So as Catholics our enthusiasm to see and hear Pope Benedict during his visit to America is rooted in what we believe about his unique identity and ministry. We are eager not simply to catch a glimpse of a distinguished religious leader. Rather we come together joyfully united in prayer and in faith because we believe the pope teaches, leads and sanctifies the universal Church in a singular way.

As Peter’s successor in our day, Pope Benedict embodies the Church’s visible unity. But this unity of faith is not an abstract or sentimental idea. It is a concrete reality knit together by our spiritual communion in the Eucharist and shared apostolic faith. In these coming days as we listen to and live the Holy Father’s message of hope, we will concretely experience this unity of faith in a sense of connectedness beyond our own local parish, community or diocese. In welcoming Pope Benedict to America, we will know a profound unity of faith, hope and love so that we may, in turn, become living witnesses to hope in our culture.

“Christ our Hope” is the theme of the Pope’s six-day trip to the United States. Pope

Benedict has often noted that the human person is redeemed not by science, technology, or material wealth, but by love that springs in hope from faith. This *catechesis of hope* will surely echo at each stop of the papal journey through America.

Pope Benedict comes to us as a *minister of hope*. And his ministry of hope is rooted in the conviction that the present crisis of faith is essentially a crisis of Christian hope. (*Spe Salvi*, 17)

To recognize our personal need and the world's need for renewed hope, we don't have to look far. Read the daily headlines or watch the evening news. Whether at home or abroad, the human condition is marked by so much hopelessness and despair in the face of the fragility, suffering and inhumanity of our world.

For a Christian, hopelessness is not the last word. Christ is our sure hope. In Christ we have more than enough reason to hope. Through Christ we offer to others an account for the hope that is in us. And with Christ we lift up and sustain, with the strength of our hope, those burdened and overwhelmed by hopelessness. The papal visit will remind each of us of this Christian dignity, this responsibility, and this unfailing hope.

At the start of the apostolic visit to Washington, Pope Benedict meets with President Bush at the White House on April 16. Then he gathers with bishops of the United States. The dialogue of faith and culture, and the realms of spiritual and political leadership, will mark this day on which the pope celebrates his 81st birthday.

On April 17, Pope Benedict speaks to a large gathering of the faithful at a Mass hosted by the Archdiocese of Washington at the new Nationals Park. Then the Holy Father addresses Catholic educators, presidents of Catholic universities and diocesan education leaders to recall the importance of Catholic education as the means by which the Church instills and nurtures Christian hope in the faithful and in society. Later that day, the pope engages in a dialogue of faith with representatives of other religions.

Pope Benedict arrives in New York the next day to begin the second leg of his apostolic journey, first to deliver a speech to the UN General Assembly and then to

meet with ecumenical leaders in Manhattan. The following day, the third anniversary of his papal election, he celebrates Mass for priests, deacons and religious, meets children with disabilities, and addresses youth and seminarians.

Finally, on Sunday, April 20, the Pope Benedict's message of hope will echo at Ground Zero, the scene of utter hopelessness during the terrorist attacks of 9/11. The papal visit will then conclude with Mass at Yankee Stadium. This papal visit, from beginning to end, will vividly manifest God's kingdom at work among us.

In April 2005, just three years ago, the whole world watched as the much beloved Pope John Paul II passed from this life to God. Who can forget those memorable April days when Catholics around the world were spiritually united in prayer, reflection and anticipation as never before? Then imprinted on our common imagination was the first sight of Pope Benedict XVI appearing on the balcony of St. Peter's Basilica.

The name "Benedict" means "blessing." And this April, over a few days, the Church in America will be singularly blessed with the presence and wisdom of Pope Benedict. As the present successor of St. Peter, he brings to us nothing less than the blessing of Christ Himself. Together let us welcome Pope Benedict XVI with lively joy, vibrant faith and renewed hope.

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