

Pope's pilgrimage will take message of peace to land of conflict

VATICAN CITY – Pope Benedict XVI is set to begin a weeklong visit to the Holy Land, a pilgrimage in the footsteps of Christ and a journey through a political and interreligious minefield.

In many ways, the May 8-15 visit to Jordan, Israel and the Palestinian territories is the most challenging of the pope's foreign visits to date, one that will test his skills of communication and bridge-building in a region of conflict and mistrust.

After recent communications missteps at the Vatican, the pope can expect to find his every word and gesture under scrutiny by the world's media – especially when it comes to relations among Christians, Muslims and Jews and the Israeli-Palestinian crisis.

Although the world may measure the success of the visit in terms of international or interfaith diplomacy, Pope Benedict is going to the Holy Land first and foremost as a religious pilgrim.

“The priority is to witness to the truth of the Incarnation by visiting, as head of the church, the places where the events of our redemption took place. That's the point,” Franciscan Father David Jaeger, an Israeli priest and adviser to the Vatican, told Catholic News Service.

The pilgrimage has a special focus on peace. The pope, in announcing the visit, said he would be going to the Holy Land to pray for “the precious gift of unity and peace for the Middle East and all humanity.”

Father Jaeger said that's extremely important at a time when hopes for peace among the population are the lowest in many years.

“The worst thing that can happen is the loss of hope for peace. So for him to speak openly of the possibility and the necessity of peace and reconciliation should thrust those values into the fore,” Father Jaeger said.

“It’s not a political negotiation of course; he’s not going to produce a peace treaty or try to. But the fact that he keeps the value of peace in front of the people of the region, that will be a tremendous contribution by the church,” he said.

The first leg of the pope’s trip will take him to Jordan for a series of carefully chosen liturgies and encounters, including a visit to a mosque in Amman. That event, and the fact that Pope Benedict is spending several days in Jordan, reflects his aim to reach a wide Muslim audience.

In 2006, Pope Benedict prayed in a mosque in Turkey, a gesture that spoke volumes to the Islamic world. In Amman, the pope will deliver a speech outside the mosque to Muslim leaders, diplomats and rectors of the University of Jordan. The audience and the setting make it likely that the pope will revisit the themes of his speech in 2006 in Regensburg, Germany, but this time making sure his remarks on reason and faith do not unintentionally offend his listeners.

For Jordan’s Catholic faithful, who number about 75,000 in a population of 6.2 million, the big event will be the papal Mass in an Amman soccer stadium May 10.

Two smaller papal events in Jordan should not go unnoticed. His first appointment in Amman is at the Regina Pacis center, a special needs facility that has inspired Christian-Muslim dialogue and collaboration. Here the pope is likely to emphasize the importance of the “dialogue of life” and social cooperation among followers of the Abrahamic faiths.

The pope also will lay the cornerstone of the University of Madaba, which is being built by the Latin patriarchate; blessing cornerstones is a common activity in papal visits, but establishing a Catholic-run university in a predominantly Muslim country makes this one special.

Much of the pope’s itinerary follows in the footsteps of Pope John Paul II’s Holy Land pilgrimage in 2000. Pope Benedict, for example, will pray at Mount Nebo in western Jordan, where Moses glimpsed the Promised Land before dying. And, like his predecessor, he will visit the Jordan River where Jesus was baptized – the setting of the opening chapter of Pope Benedict’s book, “Jesus of Nazareth.”

The pope travels to Jerusalem May 11 and later that day visits the Yad Vashem Holocaust memorial, in what Vatican aides view as a central event of the trip. When Pope John Paul spoke at the memorial in 2000, Israelis reacted with warm appreciation; many considered it a turning point in his pilgrimage.

Pope Benedict has spoken eloquently about the Holocaust, and as a German has recalled growing up as a witness to the brutality of the regime that targeted Jews for extermination. Vatican sources said, however, that the pope will not be going to Yad Vashem to apologize as a German, but to invoke a wider lesson on the dangers of racism and anti-Semitism.

On May 12, his first full day in Jerusalem, the pope visits sites sacred to Islam, Judaism and Christianity. He begins at the Dome of the Rock, one of Islam's holiest shrines, and proceeds to the Western Wall, sacred to Jews. The two sites lie adjacent to each other and in the past have been the scene of bitter skirmishes between Palestinians and Israelis. The same day the pope will meet separately with the city's two chief rabbis and the grand mufti.

The pope will make a daylong visit May 13 to the West Bank city of Bethlehem, the birthplace of Jesus and today a key administrative city of the Palestinian Authority, whose officials will welcome the pontiff at the presidential palace. The main religious event of the day is a Mass in Manger Square.

That afternoon, the pope will visit the Aida Refugee Camp, where some 5,000 Palestinians live. The visit is already politically charged. Latin Patriarch Fouad Twal of Jerusalem said recently that the camp, which has a giant key installed atop one of the camp's gates, symbolizes the "right to return," the principle that Palestinian refugees have a right to return to the homes in Israel that they have been forced to leave at various times since 1946, when the war for Israeli statehood began.

In addition, Israel has objected that the platform being built to host the Aida event is too close to the Israeli separation wall, which Israel has designed as a 400-mile-long security barrier through the West Bank and which Palestinians see as an instrument of repression.

The pope will celebrate Mass May 14 in Nazareth, the city where Jesus grew up, and

later visit the Grotto of the Annunciation and hold a prayer service with Catholic leaders of Galilee. Like his Mass earlier in the week in the Josafat Valley near the Garden of Gethsemane, these liturgies are central to the pope's pilgrimage, offering moral support to the dwindling Christian population in the land where the church was born.

U.S. Cardinal John P. Foley, grand master of the Equestrian Order of the Holy Sepulcher of Jerusalem, said the pope's visit would underline the importance of maintaining the Christian presence in the Holy Land.

"He will do what Peter always does: encourage the faithful, recognize them, give them a renewed sense of worth and let them know how much the universal church appreciates them and the importance of their faith," the cardinal said.