

# Pope's Mideast trip not the same as John Paul's

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By VICTOR L. SIMPSON –2 days ago

VATICAN CITY (AP) — Pope Benedict XVI begins a weeklong tour in the Middle East on Friday, a self-described "pilgrim of peace" seeking to strengthen frayed ties with Muslims and Jews and give support to his beleaguered Christian flock in the region.

The trip is designed along the lines of Pope John Paul II's historic pilgrimage in 2000 to Jordan, Israel and the Palestinian territories, including stops associated with Biblical events and the life of Christ.

But the conditions for the German-born Benedict's visit are vastly different since the Polish-born John Paul, who grew up in the shadow of Auschwitz, stood at Jerusalem's Western Wall and left a handwritten note apologizing for anti-Semitism by Christians.

In his four years in the papacy, Benedict has infuriated both Muslims and Jews, first with a speech linking the Prophet Muhammad to violence, then when he lifted the excommunication of a Holocaust-denying bishop.

A peace agreement between Israel and the Palestinians that seemed so near at the time of John Paul's visit has proven elusive. Benedict's trip was put in doubt by Israeli anger after a Vatican cardinal said earlier this year that the Gaza Strip during an Israeli military offensive resembled a "big concentration camp."

Vatican spokesman Federico Lombardi said the fact the trip is happening is in itself "a sign of hope" that the pope can contribute to reconciliation in the Middle East. "There were those after the Gaza conflict who wondered whether the trip would take place," the Rev. Lombardi told reporters this week.

The stop in Jordan will be Benedict's first visit as pope to an Arab country, although he visited predominantly Islamic Turkey three years ago.

Addressing himself to Jordanians, Israelis and Palestinians during his general audience Wednesday, Benedict said he shared their "aspirations and hopes as well as your pain and struggles. I will be coming among you as a pilgrim of peace."

While officials in Jordan and Israel are seeking to play down any controversy, differences remain.

Jordan's King Abdullah II, who is scheduled to greet Benedict upon arrival, said in an Italian newspaper interview Tuesday that he expected Benedict to be a force for peace.

But the country's powerful Muslim Brotherhood has demanded that Benedict apologize for his September 2006 speech in which he quoted a Medieval text that characterized some of the teachings of Muhammad as "evil and inhuman," particularly "his command to spread by the sword the faith."

The pope has already said he was "deeply sorry" over the reaction to his speech and that the passage he quoted did not reflect his own opinion.

Lombardi said the Vatican has made all possible clarifications, telling Associated Press Television News that "we cannot continue until the end of the world to repeat the same clarifications."

During his three-day stay in Jordan, Benedict is scheduled to meet with Muslim religious leaders at Amman's largest mosque — his second visit to a Muslim place of worship since becoming pope in 2005. He prayed in Istanbul's famed Blue Mosque, a gesture that helped calm the outcry over his remarks.

Benedict, who visited Israel three times before becoming pope, faces a different set of issues in the Jewish state.

The pope's forceful condemnation of anti-Semitism and acknowledgment of Vatican mistakes have softened Jewish anger over the bishop who denied the Holocaust. Benedict had lifted his excommunication along with three other ultraconservative prelates in a bid to end a church schism. Amid the uproar, the church has not allowed the bishop to resume his duties as bishop.

Lombardi said rabbis who recently visited the Vatican "were very happy and said that maybe some misunderstanding is a good occasion to have a better understanding."

Another sore point is the figure of World War II Pope Pius XII, whom Benedict has called a "great churchman." Jews and others say he failed

to do all he could to stop the extermination of European Jews.

Benedict will meet with a group of Holocaust survivors at Jerusalem's Yad Vashem memorial, though he will skip its museum, which houses a picture of Pius that has been criticized by the Vatican. The photo's caption says Pius did not protest the Nazi genocide of Jews and maintained a largely "neutral position."

Despite the dispute, Jewish leaders say Benedict, who served in the Hitler Youth corps as a young man in Germany and then in the army before deserting near the end of the war, has an excellent record in fighting anti-Semitism. He has already visited synagogues in Cologne, Germany, and New York and is expected at Rome's central synagogue later this year.

Rabbi David Rosen, one of Israel's leading voices in interfaith relations, portrayed Benedict as a good friend of the Jews and described differences with him as "an issue of style rather than an issue of substance."

Lombardi said Benedict will deliver all his speeches on the trip in English. This avoids any potential problem from his speaking in his native German, which could upset Holocaust survivors.

The pope also has Christian interests to look after, particularly seeking to stem the exodus of Christians from their ancient communities in the Middle East because of war and economic hardships.

He is expected to meet in Jordan with Iraqi Christians, driven from their homeland by violence, and with representatives of the tiny Catholic community of Gaza when he stops in Bethlehem. Israel is expected to allow Gaza's Catholics to travel to the West Bank to celebrate Mass in the town of Jesus' birth.

"Today's world is truly in need of (God's) peace, especially as it faces the tragedies of war, division, poverty and despair," Benedict told a crowd Sunday in St. Peter's Square.

*Associated Press writer Josef Federman contributed to this report from Jerusalem.*

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