

Crowds shrink for 'bland' Benedict

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Crowds shrink for 'bland' Benedict, the Pope who only ever says no

John Follain in Rome

THE crowds turning out for Pope Benedict XVI's preachings and blessings at the Vatican are dwindling fast as the dour pontiff pays the price for his lack of charisma and visibility compared with John Paul II, his showman predecessor.

Figures from the Vatican show the number of pilgrims attending Benedict's weekly audiences, mainly in a vast auditorium by St Peter's Basilica, and his Sunday Angelus in St Peter's Square where he speaks from his study window, shrank from 2.8m in 2007 to 2.2m in 2008.

This is a far cry from the 4m people who came to the Vatican or the papal summer residence of Castel Gandolfo in the first year after his 2005 election, when the novelty factor drew crowds bigger than in the final years of John Paul. The figures are expected to drop further as the economic downturn hits global travel.

Before his election as leader of 1 billion Catholics, Joseph Ratzinger, the German cardinal and theologian, had been branded "God's rottweiler" and "the Panzerkardinal" because of his work as an enforcer of doctrine. His personality was contrasted with John Paul, known as "the Grand Communicator" because of his media-friendly skills.

Visitors to the Vatican often pay tribute to John Paul. They shuffle past his tomb in the crypt of St Peter's Basilica and postcards bearing his image still sell well.

Vito Mancuso, a theologian critical of Benedict, linked the smaller crowds to the worldwide fall in priestly vocations and decline in church attendance. He advised Benedict, 81, to stop "saying always and only 'no' ". The church needed to be more humble and doubtful about its rulings on the role of women, sexuality and bioethics, he said.

In the latest "no", the Vatican on New Year's Day stopped automatically adopting Italian laws because of potential "antiCatholic legislation" involving euthanasia and gay marriage. In an address to Vatican staff, Benedict said homosexuality threatened humanity as much as did rainforest destruction.

"Benedict's papacy has in the long run a polarising impact inside the Catholic world. In one camp there are those who are enthusiastic about Ratzinger's government; in the other camp are those who aren't attracted by it," said Marco Politi, a Vatican watcher.

Benedict's appeal appeared strongest on his trips abroad last year; journeys to France, Australia and the United States were successful despite controversy over paedophile priests.

George Weigel, John Paul's biographer, said the numbers going to the Vatican were still impressive. "Can you imagine any other public figure in the world to whom millions of people freely come for instruction and inspiration? What's most striking about the pilgrims at papal audiences under Benedict XVI is how carefully they listen to him; he's a master teacher," he said.

John Allen of the National Catholic Reporter, an American weekly, said Benedict was still drawing bigger crowds than John Paul at a comparable point in his pontificate but his appeal was limited to "Catholic insiders". "Last year Benedict drew nothing like the saturation coverage in the global press that surrounded John Paul at a similar stage of his papacy. Benedict is a distinctly less interesting figure than John Paul for the outside world," he said.

Benedict is unlikely to lose sleep over the dwindling crowds. "I don't think he'll tear his hair out. The Pope isn't a celebrity. His problem is the clarity of his teaching – not how many listen, but how many remember the message," said Rocco Buttiglione, a Christian Democrat politician and a friend of Benedict.

Benedict told Vatican staff he did not want to be a "star" around whom everything revolved, but "only and completely" the vicar of Christ.

Vittorio Messori, co-author of bestselling books with both John Paul and Benedict, dismissed the dwindling crowds as insignificant. "The Pope

represents Jesus Christ and Jesus Christ isn't subject to popularity rankings. In fact, the more a Pope 'pleases', the less likely he'll be an authentic icon of Christ," he said.

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