

Pope in Germany calls for unity, many frustrated

Reuters

September 25, 2011

FREIBURG, Sept 25 – Pope Benedict appealed for unity today from Catholics in his native Germany who have been leaving the Church in record numbers, but many who came to hear him said they were frustrated by his staunchly conservative message.

Delivering his last major address of a four-day trip at a mass for tens of thousands of people at a small airport near the southwestern city of Freiburg, the Pope called on Catholics to unite to behind his own leadership.

“The Church in Germany will continue to be a blessing for the entire Catholic world if she remains faithfully united with the successor of St Peter,” he said, referring to himself.

His third trip as pope to his native country has been his toughest, met by protest over sex abuse scandals and by pressure from an increasingly assertive liberal wing of the Church that wants reforms and views his conservatism as outdated.

Benedict has closed the door on changes to Church opposition to gay marriage, married clergy or women priests and has indicated he will not ease restrictions on divorced Catholics who have remarried outside the Church.

From highly secular Berlin to former communist Erfurt to Catholic Freiburg, he has hammered home his view that the Church cannot change merely to suit the whims of the times.

Polls say many German Catholics disagree. A record 181,000 officially quit the Church this year, for the first time more than joined and more than those quitting Protestant churches.

Many of the 100,000 worshippers who came to the airport outside Freiburg, while happy to have an opportunity to attend mass celebrated by the pope, said they were frustrated by his opposition to change.

“I had hoped he might rally people more to the Church, especially young people,” said Martine Kircher, 50, who brought her four children from Heidelberg to see the pope.

“But he didn’t show a path of renewal,” she said. “Instead he seemed to be rowing back to the old values.”

Even in an increasingly secularised society, the Catholic and Protestant churches are major institutions in Germany.

About a third of Germans are Catholics, a third Protestants and a third unaffiliated or members of minority faiths such as Muslims and Jews. Members are required to pay a church tax which helps fund extensive social, educational and health programmes.

Polls show that many Germans, thrilled when he was elected in 2005, now see the pope as an obstinate figure out of step with how his homeland has developed since reunification in 1990.

Office worker Holder Gasch, 37, one of those in today's crowd, said: "The Church needs to be more progressive in its attitude towards homosexuality and women."

Several lay Catholic leaders and even some bishops have urged the pope in recent weeks to allow some reforms, a request he appeared to reject yesterday when he said that without a renewed faith, "all structural reform will remain ineffective".

The issue of sexual abuse of children by priests has been in the background through most of the trip. At the start of the trip he said the Church was made of "good fish and bad fish" and urged Catholics not to leave because of the scandal.

The Church in Germany has received almost 700 requests for compensation for victims of sexual and physical abuse, while a victims' association estimates that more than 2,000 people were mistreated by Catholic priests in recent decades.

Benedict held a surprise meeting on Friday in the city of Erfurt with victims of clerical sexual abuse and expressed his deep regret for their suffering. Victims' associations say the Vatican has not done enough to bring perpetrators to justice.

"The pope is doing nothing and the dioceses are trying to cover everything up," said Wilfried Fesselman of Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests (SNAP). Victims joined 8,000 protesters on a march through Berlin at the start of the visit.

Michael Ebertz, who teaches sociology of religion in a Catholic college in Freiburg, said the pope's sermon could be a call to bishops not to let lay Catholics take over a major dialogue they launched in reaction to the sexual abuse scandals.

"It could mean that, in the end, the bishops will decide what real belief is and this can't be left to the dialogue process to decide," he said on ZDF television. – Reuters

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