

Shepherd One Has Landed!

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Staff Writer

(April 15, 2008) Pope Benedict XVI began his first visit to the United States today when “Shepherd One” landed precisely at 4:00 p.m. at Andrews Air Force Base in Washington DC. Smiling and waving to the crowd, the Holy Father strode briskly along the red-carpeted tarmac with the President, Laura and Jenna Bush at his side.

Also on hand were several Church officials including Archbishop Pietro Sambi, Vatican nuncio to the United States; Cardinal Francis George of Chicago, president of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops; Archbishop Donald Wuerl of Washington and Archbishop Timothy Broglio of the Archdiocese for the Military Services USA.

When the pope arrived, the color guard offered its customary greeting for a head of state with a brief ceremony that contained no speeches. Hundreds of guests were also on hand, including military families and young people from several area Catholic high schools. As he walked to the car that will escort him to the apostolic nunciature, the crowd began to sing “Happy Birthday” in honor of his 81st birthday, which he will celebrate tomorrow.

Formal greetings are planned for tomorrow morning at 10:30 a.m. on the South Lawn of the White House where a crowd of up to 12,000 people is expected to be greet him, larger than the 7,000 who gathered to greet Queen Elizabeth II last year. Afterward, the Pope will meet with the President where analysts expect they will mainly discuss the war in Iraq.

When the two met in the Vatican last summer, Pope Benedict expressed his concern about the “the worrisome situation in Iraq.” Although Bush later characterized the Pope’s concerns as mostly limited to the treatment of the Christian minority in Muslim-majority Iraq, a statement out of the Vatican suggests a broader discussion this time around.

Pope Benedict has never hidden his disapproval of the war. Before the 2003 invasion, while still Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, he categorically dismissed the idea that a preventive strike against Iraq could be justified under Catholic doctrine. In his Easter message last year, Benedict said “nothing positive comes from Iraq.”

Irregardless of their differences, however, the president is giving the Pope an unprecedented amount of attention. During an interview with Raymond Arroyo on Friday evening, he explained his special treatment of the leader of the world’s one billion Catholics.

“One, he speaks for millions. Two, he doesn’t come as a politician; he comes as a man of faith. And, three, I subscribe to his notion that there’s right and wrong in life, that moral relativism has a danger of undermining the capacity to have more hopeful and free societies, that I want to honor his convictions, as well.”

The White House is planning a fancy East Room dinner tomorrow evening which will celebrate his German heritage with Bavarian-style food. Although the Pope cannot attend because he will be celebrating vespers at the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception, Catholic leaders are expected to attend in his stead.

The new U.S. ambassador to the Vatican, former Harvard University Law School professor Mary Ann Glendon, says she expects Pope Benedict XVI's upcoming visit to the United States to be a thought-provoking event for Catholics, non-Catholics and international representatives.

Americans who listen carefully will discover in the pope a “world-class intellectual who can speak in terms that are simple and clear and readily accessible,” Mary Ann Glendon said in an interview with Catholic News Service.

The pope can be expected to touch on some particular social issues, but his deeper message will be about conscience-forming and the values that underpin life in the church and in society, she said.

“Let me be quite clear,” she said. “I think the kinds of things he says require close attention. He does not dumb down, and I think that’s his particular gift, that he is able to communicate very profound and complex ideas in accessible language.”

After tomorrow’s meeting with president, the Popemobile will transport the Holy Father back to the nunciature where he will have lunch with U.S. cardinals and officers of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and representatives of Catholic charitable foundations.

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