

Pope will reach out to German Protestants on state visit

by [Ruby Russell](#)

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Berlin, September 21 (ENInews)--Pope Benedict XVI, on his first state visit to his native country, arrives in Berlin on 22 September in what many see as a unique opportunity for increased understanding between Catholic and Protestant Churches.

During the four-day visit, he will lead an ecumenical service on 23 September at the Augustinian Monastery in the city of Erfurt, where Martin Luther, founder of the Protestant Reformation, studied in the 16th century. "We do not expect a sensation," Benedict said in an address broadcast on German television on 18 September. "The great thing about it is that we are thinking together at this place, hearing the Word of God and praying, and so are together in our hearts and true ecumenism occurs."

Benedict said meeting with representatives of the Evangelical Church in Germany (the federation of Protestant churches in Germany, or EKD) will be a highlight of the four-day visit. Reinhard Mawick, a spokesman for the EKD said the Erfurt events were planned in response to a letter from Benedict to EKD President Nikolaus Schneider, asking that ecumenical discussion play a significant role in his visit.

Schneider said that he was looking forward to meeting Benedict, and was convinced of the pope's commitment to cooperation with German Protestant churches. "Ecumenism is not an academic event in the churches but has everything to do with the lives of believers," he said in a statement on the website of a religious talk show.

But Schneider also acknowledged that rifts between the churches remain. "Naturally this conversation won't bring a solution to all problems," said Schneider. "The pope has hurt us Protestants, including myself, when he

described the Catholic Church as 'the one true church' and deprived us of the status of a church."

In 2000, then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, in his role as the Vatican's Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, wrote that the Protestant "ecclesiastical communities" are not churches in the true sense.

Germany's 50 million Christians are almost equally split between the Catholic and Protestant churches and a major issue for many is that the Catholic Church bars non-Catholics from receiving communion.

"We have millions of people who are in inter-religious marriages who can't go to services together," Karin Kortmann, vice president of the Central Committee of German Catholics said in an interview. "There is the expectation that the Pope will speak about this and take a position which leads to a development. We have ecumenical issues where a great number of Catholics and Protestants would like to see the various branches of Christianity come closer."

With the 500th anniversary of the Reformation coming up in 2017, many hope to see greater acceptance between the Christian denominations that began to go separate ways when Luther nailed his "95 theses," or criticisms of the Catholic Church, to the door of All Saints' Church in Wittenberg in 1517.

"That is naturally an important anniversary in Germany, and there is a desire to see the pope say something about this, and perhaps to give a somewhat more positive Catholic view of the Reformation," EKD spokesman Mawick said in an interview.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel, the daughter of a Lutheran pastor, said she was delighted to be attending Benedict's ecumenical service. "I think it is important to emphasize the unity of Christians at a time when we are confronted by a growing secularism," Merkel said in a podcast ahead of the pope's visit.

Benedict will also meet with representatives of the Orthodox churches in Freiburg on 24 September. Meetings with Jewish and Muslim representatives are scheduled for the first leg of the tour in Berlin.

"We are a country of immigrants," said Kortmann. "There are a lot of Muslims in our community ... dialogue among the various religions present in Germany must also be promoted."

The most dramatic event in terms of scale will be a celebration of the Eucharist at Berlin's Olympic stadium on 22 September where Benedict will address an expected crowd of 70,000.

But the visit comes at a difficult time for the Catholic Church in Germany. Figures released in July indicated that for the first time, those leaving the Catholic Church last year in Germany exceeded new members. Many put the attrition down to recent sex abuse scandals.

In addition, up to 20,000 protestors are expected to gather close to the Reichstag when Benedict gives a speech to the German parliament in Berlin on 22 September. Those involved in the demonstrations will include gay and lesbian rights organizations, groups in favour of reform of the Catholic Church -- including the ordination of women priests and abolishing the rule of celibacy for the clergy -- as well as organizations supporting victims of abuse by priests.