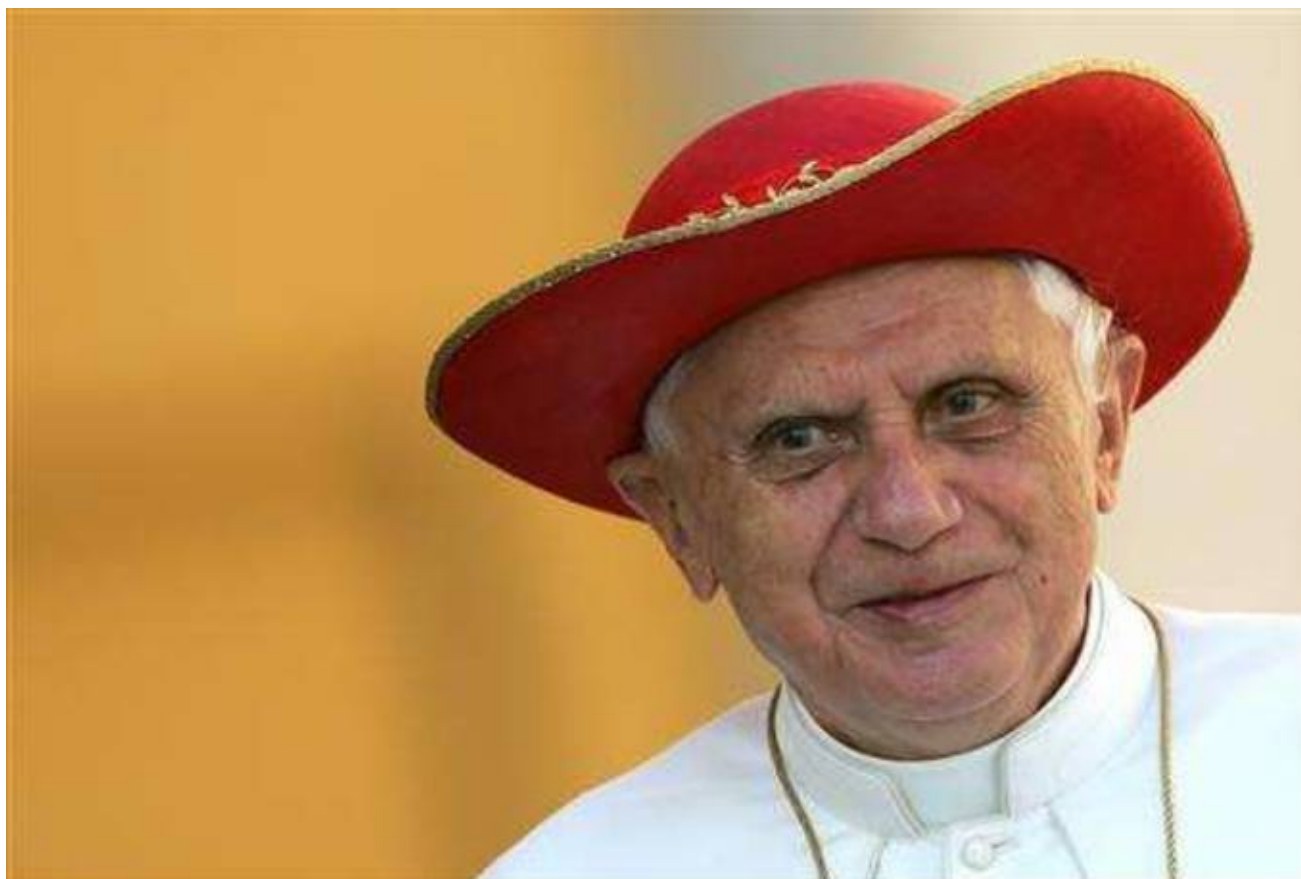


Benedict XVI to Visit the U.S.

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The Pope's visit comes at a difficult moment for the U.S. Catholic Church. But, according to some analysts, Benedict XVI could galvanize American Catholics and influence the outcome of 2008 presidential elections.

Recent rumors that Pope Benedict XVI was planning to travel to the U.S. were confirmed when the Vatican said he had accepted an invitation from the U.N. to address the General Assembly. According to the official schedule the pope is confirmed to arrive at the Andrews Air Force base in Maryland on April 15 and leave from New York on April 20. The trip will come exactly three years after Benedict's election and will be his eighth official journey abroad.

On April 16, he will meet President Bush in Washington. The day after, the pope is scheduled to say



mass in Nationals Park in Washington, D.C. and meet students and professors from the city's Catholic University. He will then fly to New York where he will address the U.N. General Assembly. Benedict XVI will say mass in St Patrick's cathedral, visit Ground Zero, and say mass at the Yankee Stadium, before flying back to Rome.

Announcing details of Benedict's American visit to U.S. bishops in Baltimore, the Holy See's nuncio in the U.S., Archbishop Pietro Sambi, said he hoped it would bring a "new spring to the Church in America."

The visit comes at a difficult moment for the U.S. Catholic Church. In past years a series of reports exposed widespread allegations of sex abuse by clergy, as well as efforts by the Catholic Church hierarchy to cover it up. These reports triggered a chain reaction and thousands of victims of clergy sex abuse around the country went public and filed suit, creating a scandal that rocked American Catholicism and has cost the Catholic Church more than \$1 billion.

According to some analysts, the pope's visit seven months before U.S. presidential elections could influence the outcome. Reaching out to mass-attending Catholics will not be easy in 2008. Rudolph Giuliani, provided he wins the GOP nomination, is Italian/American and Catholic, but he is also divorced, and pro-choice. The Democrat's front runner Hillary Clinton, on the other hand, has a vigorous social justice agenda that could appeal to many Catholics. In this context, if Benedict XVI's visit galvanizes the Catholic electorate their vote might become a serious issue.

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