



World Youth Day Opens in Cologne

Cardinal Meisner Extends Invitations, Including One Heavenward

COLOGNE, Germany, AUG. 16, 2005 (Zenit.org).- Cardinal Joachim Meisner opened World Youth Day with an invitation to Benedict XVI as well as to the late Pope John Paul II.

The archbishop of Cologne presided over a Mass today in the city's RheinEnergie Stadium, whose attendees included German President Horst Köhler.

During his homily, the German cardinal recalled his meeting with John Paul II in Rome's Gemelli Polyclinic, three weeks before his death, when the Pope asked him: "Are they still waiting for me in Cologne?"

"I replied: 'Holy Father, we are faithfully waiting for you,'" Cardinal Meisner said. "We now call up to heaven, 'Holy Father John Paul II, we are waiting for you!'"

"And we call to Rome: 'Holy Father Benedict XVI, we are waiting for you!'"

John Paul II convoked this World Youth Day. It was the only international trip he kept as a possibility until his death April 2.

Benedict XVI will be welcomed officially by young people on Thursday. He will close World Youth Day next Sunday, in what will be his first international trip as Bishop of Rome.

More than 400,000 youths have registered for the event. Estimates say the final figure might exceed 800,000.

Eye to eye

During his homily, Cardinal Meisner invited young people to seek God as the wise men of the Gospel did, whose relics, according to tradition, are in Cologne's cathedral.

The World Youth Day motto was taken by John Paul II from the affirmation of those three mysterious men from the East: "We Have Come to Worship Him."

"Worshipping him on bended knee does not make us small, it makes us great, because it takes us eye to eye with God," said the archbishop.

Two other Masses were celebrated simultaneously in two other German cities.

In Bonn, a World Youth Day Mass was presided over by Osnabrueck Bishop Franz-Josef Bode, and attended by 50,000 youths, while in Duesseldorf, the Mass was presided over by Cardinal Karl Lehmann, president of the German episcopal conference, and attended by 20,000 young people.

The Masses were followed by the Welcome Festival, a celebration of music and testimonies in Cologne, Bonn and Duesseldorf, to welcome the Youth Day participants.

On Wednesday morning participants will attend catecheses and Masses presided over by bishops, and in the afternoon they will attend the Youth Festival.