

Bush to Say Nation Open to Pope's Message

Spokeswoman Expects Leaders to Discuss Shared Values

WASHINGTON, D.C., APRIL 15, 2008 ([Zenit.org <http://www.zenit.org>](http://www.zenit.org)).- A White House spokeswoman said President George Bush plans to tell Benedict XVI that millions of Americans have been praying for his visit and that their hearts are open to his message.

Dana Perino affirmed this at a press briefing today in the nation's capital, just a few hours before the Pope landed at Andrews Air Force Base. Bush and his wife and one of his daughter greeted the Holy Father at the tarmac.

Perino said that when Bush receives the Pope Wednesday at the White House, he will "say to the Holy Father that millions of Americans have been praying for his visit. He will also say to the Holy Father that the nation he will visit is a nation of prayer that welcomes the faithful. He will tell him that the hearts of the American people are open to the Holy Father's message of hope.

"And he will hear from the president that America and the world need to hear his message that God is love, that human life is sacred, that we all must be guided by common moral law, and that we have responsibilities to care for our brothers and sisters in need at home and across the world."

Perino characterized the trip as a "wonderful, historic" visit and said that the president and his wife "feel great respect, love and friendship for Pope Benedict. And the White House staff, across the board, we are all very excited."

Wednesday's arrival ceremony at the president's residence will be "one of the largest arrival ceremonies ever held at the White House. And the weather conditions are expected to be spectacular, so that will make it even more special, since this time of year can be dicey in that regard," she added.

Rights and dignity

The spokeswoman said she expects the president's address Wednesday to consider some of the areas where Benedict XVI and Bush "have a shared commitment and shared values, such as human rights and individual dignity, their work together to combat extremist ideology, especially in the Muslim world that -- obviously, the Pope has been no stranger to criticism by extremists, as well -- and so the president and the Pope have shared a desire to work together to combat terrorism."

Perino also confirmed that Bush is interested in the Pope's work to establish interreligious dialogue, saying "that's something that the president welcomes, especially as we are confronting these issues of extremist ideology around the world."

"I think they will talk about religious freedom," she added. "They will also probably touch on Africa and the shared commitments that they have for helping the human rights crisis there, helping combat and eradicate disease and hunger, among other issues there in Africa. And I also expect they will probably talk a little bit about Lebanon."

Iraq

Reminded of the Holy Father's recent statement that "nothing positive comes from [the conflict] in Iraq," Perino said she did not expect a prolonged conversation between the two leaders on the issue.

"Well, they have a relationship that is based on trust and they are able to have frank conversations," she said. "Obviously there was a difference of opinion back in 2003 and beyond, in subsequent years. But now I think that there is an understanding that with the strategy that's working in Iraq right now, the most important thing we can do is help to solidify the situation, root it into freedom and democracy

so that people [...] of a religious faith who are minorities in their countries can practice freely and be free from persecution.

"And that is something that they share. I expect them to touch on that a little bit."

Later Perino said that she expected the leaders to discuss "the root issue of terrorism and extremism," adding that "the president will thank Pope Benedict for deciding to go and visit ground zero and pay his respects there, and the president thinks that's a very important gesture."

Perino further acknowledged that the Holy Father and Bush do not share the same outlook on the death penalty: "And so there's a place where there's a divergence. But I would caution you that there is much more agreement between these two leaders than there is disagreement