

The Vatican announced this week that Pope Benedict XVI will travel to Germany in August for World Youth Day. As preparations for this event were underway last year, John Paul II announced his desire to attend – if, of course, he were able. Pope Benedict comes from Germany, so it will be very fitting for him to fulfill the desire of John Paul and attend the conference this summer.

The travels of Pope John Paul endeared him to the world. But he saw himself as a missionary, not a celebrity. He journeyed from country to country to proclaim Christ. In doing so, he helped unite believers around the world and link them to the church in Rome. In the history of the world, no other human being was seen by more people in person than John Paul II. As his life drew to an end, the man who traveled to see the people of the world found that the people of the world had traveled to see him.

He was not the first pope to travel. That honor goes to Peter. Peter and the apostles first operated out of Jerusalem, where Jesus had risen from the dead. However, persecutions arose and many believers fled from the city. The persecutors hoped to end Christianity, but they only succeeded in spreading it farther, as the believers journeyed from country to country and proclaimed Christ. One of the places they went was Samaria, where the people clung to an old form of religion and despised the Israelites of God's covenant. There, where Jew and Samaritan had been enemies, both were uniting in their belief in Jesus Christ.

Today's first reading tells of the deacon Philip, who proclaimed Christ to the Samaritans, expelled unclean spirits and cured many who were paralyzed or crippled. He baptized the believers, and then Peter, whom we regard as the first pope, traveled. He visited Samaria together with the apostle John. The two of them prayed for the Samaritans, imposed hands on them, and imparted the Holy Spirit.

Eventually, Peter made a more arduous trip, from Jerusalem to Rome, where he built up the new Christian communities. According to reliable traditions in Rome, Peter was himself persecuted, arrested, and put to death. He was buried in a cemetery on a hill they called even in those days the Vatican, and pilgrims have visited his shrine for 2000 years.

Travel is exciting to think about, especially as summer is approaching, but there is more to travel than having fun. A lot of people travel for vacation, to go to college, or on business. Others travel because of persecution or harassment by family members or neighbors. Some go half a world away for years at a time; others cross the street to pay a short visit. From Peter to Benedict XVI, we have examples of people who traveled with a purpose in mind, to proclaim Christ. Whenever we leave home, we don't leave behind our beliefs and our morals. We pack them too. And to everyone we meet – strangers and old friends alike – we are to proclaim Christ by our words and deeds.