NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (https://www.ncronline.org)

The Holy Chalice of Valencia

John L. Allen Jr. | Jul. 7, 2006 All Things Catholic

One intriguing sidebar to the Spain trip is that the Cathedral of Valencia, which Benedict XVI will visit Saturday, houses what is traditionally believed to be the Holy Grail itself, i.e., the cup used by Christ to celebrate the Last Supper.

Believers regard it as a relic equal in importance to the Shroud of Turin, the reputed burial cloth of Christ.

In its current form, the storied "Holy Chalice of Valencia" consists of two parts.

The upper cup, regarded as the original cup of Christ, is made of red agate stone, semi-spherical in shape, sometimes described as the size of half an orange. According to the tradition, the cup was sent to Spain by St. Lawrence, himself a Spaniard, during anti-Christian persecutions under Emperor Valerian in 258 AD.

One scholar has dated the cup to between the second century B.C .and the first century A.D., and says it originated in a workshop of Egypt, Syria or Palestine -- as close as one is likely to come to scientific confirmation of the tradition, though obviously not definitive.

The base, formed by an oval inverted cup, is adorned with gold along the lower edge, and has a stem containing 27 pearls, rubies, and emeralds. It's considered a medieval addition.

Pope John Paul II was a devotee of the Holy Chalice. During his Nov. 8, 1982, visit to Valencia, he kissed the chalice and called it "a witness to Christ's passage on earth." Later, he celebrated Mass with it, believed to be the first time a pope had done so since Sixtus II more than 1,700 years earlier.

Papal spokesman Joaquin Navarro-Valls told me on Monday that plans do not call for Benedict XVI to use the Holy Chalice for Mass, but "it's always possible." The pope will visit the cathedral Saturday, where the chalice is revered in the "Chapel of the Holy Grail," just to the right of the main entrance.

The story of the cup's vicissitudes is told in Janice Bennett's 2002

book *St. Laurence and the Holy Grail: The Story of the Holy Chalice of Valencia* (Ignatius Press).

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The Vatican announced this week that after his return from Spain, the pope will head for Valle d'Aosta in northern Italy for 18 days of vacation, from July 11 to 28. His regular Wednesday general audiences will be cancelled.

In light of what I wrote last week about "Salesian chic," it's worth pointing out that the two-story, wood and stone chalet where Benedict will reside was built in the 1990s by the Salesians to host John Paul II. Last year, the Salesians installed a piano in deference to Benedict's passion for the keyboard.

On July 28, Benedict will go to his summer residence at Castel Gandolfo, resuming his General Audiences on Aug. 2. While he's out of Rome, all private and special audiences remain suspended.

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Source URL (retrieved on *02/20/2017 - 12:43*): https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/all-things-catholic/holy-chalice-valencia