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The pope's communication paradox

John L. Allen Jr. | May. 17, 2007 All Things Catholic

Benedict XVI hadn't even stepped off the papal plane at Rome's Ciampino airport on Monday, ending his May 9-13 Brazilian swing, when controversy from the trip caught up with him. Spokespersons for Brazil's indigenous populations were incensed by comments the pope made in Aparecida late Sunday afternoon, asserting that the arrival of Christianity did not amount to "the imposition of a foreign culture" upon the native peoples of the New World. To the natives, that seemed a nasty bit of historical revisionism.

This post-Brazil contretemps offers the latest confirmation that as a public figure, Benedict XVI has two qualities which often work at cross-purposes.

On the one hand, Benedict is an exceptionally lucid communicator. He's a gifted logician, so his conclusions flow naturally from his premises. Moreover, he's able to synthesize complex ideas in easy-to-understand formula, so you don't need a degree in theology to get his point. Yet Benedict can also be remarkably tone-deaf to how his pronouncements may sound to people who don't share his intellectual and cultural premises.

The most spectacular example was, of course, his lecture at the University of Regensburg in September 2006. In context, Benedict felt it was clear he was talking about reason and faith, not taking a swipe at Muslims. Yet this context was not immediately obvious to people unschooled in papal rhetoric, and they were certainly not going to get it from a 30-second sound bite on the TV news.

One form his tone-deafness takes is failure to distinguish between abstractions and flesh-and-blood human realities, and the Brazil fracas offers a classic case in point.

Paulo Suess, an adviser to Brazil's Indian Missionary Council, said the pope "is a good theologian, but it seems he missed some history classes." Marcio Meira, who heads Brazil's federal Indian Bureau, said, "As an anthropologist and a historian I feel obliged to say that, yes, in the past 500 years there was an imposition of the Catholic religion on the indigenous people."

In truth, this is more a verbal dispute than a substantive one. Benedict never denied that many colonizers behaved atrociously. His point was about Christianity, not Christians. Because Christ came for all, Benedict reasoned, Christianity was not alien to pre-Columbian cultures; it was the fulfillment to which their religious experience pointed. It's the same argument ancient Christian writers made about Greco-Roman religions -- they were *semina verbi*, "seeds of the word," which came to fruition in Christ.

That claim in no way denies the responsibility of individual Christians for decimating local cultures. The pope, however, didn't exactly bend over backwards to make this clear.

Editor's Note: In his daily column May 16, John Allen reported: Motu proprio alert: Castrillon confirms ruling is coming [1]. If you missed that report, you can read it now [1].

Over the years, Benedict has gotten himself into trouble in just this fashion. He'll make statements like, "Christianity is incompatible with violence," or "the church is incapable of sin," which set teeth grinding for anyone who knows even a smattering of history. What Benedict has in mind are Christianity and the church as Platonic forms -- he's well aware that individual Christians, and the concrete institutional church, have sometimes failed to live up to those great ideals.

This helps explain, I think, why initiates and outsiders often have such diametrically opposing reactions to Benedict's statements. After the Regensburg lecture, the crowd in the aula magna of the university didn't file out thinking they had just witnessed the opening salvo of the next Danish cartoon controversy -- they were abuzz about the pope's masterful reflection on reason and faith. That's because they understood where Benedict was coming from; later, we saw how people without this framework reacted.

The same thing happens on other subjects.

When the pope talks about the defects of liberation theology, for example, he means a theological system. He's not impugning the heroism, even the sanctity, of many people motivated by liberation theology -- as witnessed by his statement aboard the papal plane that the late Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador merits beatification.

To take another case in point, when Benedict XVI went to Auschwitz in May 2006, he argued that by killing the Jews, the Nazis also struck at Christianity, because their object was to kill God as the ultimate limit on human power. The statement outraged some Jews, who felt the pope was trying to turn Christians into victims, thereby ducking their complicity in the Holocaust. In fact, the pope was not denying that Christians had sinned; he meant that Christianity *in se*, in its essence, was a threat to National Socialism, because it testified to a power higher than the *Volk*. That's a thought-provoking assertion, but given the way it was expressed, it's hardly surprising some Jews were disturbed.

For those who know Benedict's mind, it can be painful to watch his carefully reasoned reflections become capsized in the court of public opinion by a stray phrase that's obviously open to misinterpretation, and which, most of the time, could have been put differently with no loss of meaning.

By now, there's a familiar cycle when the pope says something that triggers outrage. Clarifications, expressions of regret, and assurances of future dialogue tumble out from official spokespersons. The immediate crisis is surmounted, but a residue of suspiciousness is left behind. I recall what one person in Istanbul said to me

following Benedict's trip to Turkey last November, when he strove mightily to repair the damage from Regensburg: "We're still not sure we like this pope," the Turk said, "but we dislike him less." That's progress, to be sure, but it would have been better if they never had any reason to dislike him in the first place.

This kind of misunderstanding has happened often enough during Joseph Ratzinger's career that it won't wash to say he doesn't know any better. So what gives?

Benedict is close to the *communio* school in Catholic theology, whose key figures accent the need for the church to speak its own language. It's an "insider's" discourse, premised on the conviction that Christianity is itself a culture, often at odds with the prevailing worldview of modernity. All this is part of Benedict's project of defending Catholic identity against pressures to assimilate in a relativistic, secularized world.

Benedict also has tremendous interior freedom, meaning he doesn't conduct focus groups before deciding what to say. Certainly no one wants Benedict shackled to a platitudinous form of political rhetoric, designed principally to avoid offense.

Yet a pope is, inevitably, Catholicism's chief ambassador to the outside world, including people not predisposed to give the church the benefit of the doubt. That implies a special responsibility to weigh one's words carefully, not just for their inner logic, but also for their potential cultural and political repercussions. It's not enough to insist that the world take the church on its own terms -- one has to meet it halfway.

To be fair, Benedict has shown flashes of a capacity to do just that, such as his moment of silent prayer alongside the Grand Mufti of Istanbul in the Blue Mosque. Moreover, it's hardly the case that the Brazil trip was a disaster. Benedict's obvious warmth played well, and even his tough line on some issues won high marks for intellectual cogency. Nonetheless, the bitter after-taste generated by the controversy over indigenous persons is unnecessary and distracting, and it's hardly *sui generis*.

Thus, we face the paradox of a pope who is a master communicator, but who nonetheless needs work on his communications skills. Someone in his inner circle, someone he trusts, needs to take him aside and have this conversation. So I ask again the question I posed immediately after Regensburg: "Who will say 'no' to the pope?"

To date, it remains a question awaiting an answer.

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