

Highlights from papal homilies and addresses; From the 'no sense of humor' file

John L. Allen Jr. | Jan. 11, 2008 All Things Catholic

College football fans probably felt a bit deflated this Tuesday, since the Bowl Championship Series, always their favorite time of year, came to a close Monday night. For Vatican devotees, Tuesday likewise brought a twinge of melancholy, and for much the same reason: the annual "bowl championship series" of papal teaching, which begins in mid-December with a message for the World Day of Peace, ended Monday with the pope's address to the diplomatic corps accredited to the Holy See.

Between those rhetorical bookends fell three important homilies (Christmas, the Feast of Mary the Mother of God on New Year's, and Epiphany), as well as a major speech to the Roman Curia, the year-end *Urbi et Orbi* message, a vespers service on New Year's Eve, and four Angelus addresses. All told, Benedict XVI offered more than 17,500 words of teaching, a veritable buffet of verbiage.

Since the pope's BCS is now over, it's a good time to roll the highlight reel. Doing so may offer hints of Benedict's priorities for 2008, a year that will feature his April 15-20 visit to the United States.

(1) Around the World

At the geopolitical level, Benedict underscored the Vatican's "preferential option" for the Middle East and Africa. Those were the only two zones specifically cited in Benedict's message for the World Day of Peace, marked by the Vatican on Jan. 1.

In his Jan. 7 address to diplomats, Benedict wielded his most dramatic language to date about the crisis in Darfur, warning that "hope seems almost vanquished by the menacing sequence of hunger and death." Speaking in French, Benedict also expressed concern for Congo, Somalia, Ethiopia and Kenya.

On the Middle East, the pope called anew for peace between Israelis and Palestinians. He said the Lebanese people should be able to "decide freely on their future," an indirect reference to outside interference, above all from Syria. The pope also voiced alarm over "terrorist attacks, threats and violence" in Iraq, "especially against the Christian community."

Turning to Asia, the pope mentioned Afghanistan, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Myanmar. On Europe, Benedict

praised progress towards peace in the Balkans and called for resolution of the long-running drama in Cyprus. He said unity in Europe will endure "if it does not deny its Christian roots."

Benedict also called for stronger antipoverty efforts and for disarmament, specifically urging a negotiated resolution to disputes over Iran's nuclear program.

(2) The Family

The theme of the World Peace Day message was "The Human Family, A Community of Peace." The pope argued that the family, based on marriage between a man and a woman, is the natural building block of society and a "school of peace."

In that regard, the pope argued that "family values" and social justice, often opposed in secular politics, are a package deal: trying to have one without the other, he warned, is a prescription for heartache.

"Everything that serves to weaken the family based on the marriage of a man and a woman," he said, "everything that directly or indirectly stands in the way of its openness to the responsible acceptance of a new life, everything that obstructs its right to be primarily responsible for the education of its children, constitutes an objective obstacle on the road to peace."

(3) The Environment

Benedict XVI returned repeatedly to what has become a leitmotif of his social and political concerns: the environment, especially energy scarcity. In his Christmas homily, for example, the pope lamented "the abuse of energy and its selfish and reckless exploitation," saying that we witness today "a polluted world whose future is at risk."

Benedict distinguished his purchase on ecology from secular environmentalism, insisting in his World Day of Peace message that human beings possess transcendent worth vis-à-vis nature, and that environmental policy must be crafted free from "ideological pressure to draw hasty conclusions."

At the same time, Benedict insisted that "the problems looming on the horizon are complex, and the time is short."

With the diplomats, the pope quoted Paul VI's well-known adage that "development is the new name of peace." He added ecology to the mix, saying: "Peace is a commitment and a manner of life which demands that the legitimate aspirations of all should be satisfied, such as access to food, water and energy, to medicine and technology, or indeed the monitoring of climate change."

In his homily for Epiphany, Benedict stressed the need for sustainable patterns of consumption, especially in developed nations. He argued that such moderation today is not merely "an ascetic rule, but a path of salvation for humanity."

(4) Islam

Benedict twice cited a letter addressed to him in October by 138 Muslim jurists, clerics and scholars, suggesting theological common ground between Muslims and Christians.

"I responded with joy, expressing my deep agreement with those noble sentiments, and at the same time underlining the urgency of a common effort to defend the values of reciprocal respect, dialogue and collaboration," he told the Roman Curia.

"Our shared recognition of the existence of a single God, a benevolent Creator and universal Judge of everyone's conduct, constitutes the basis for common action in defense of the dignity of every human person, and for the creation of a more just and fraternal society."

While the comments expressed Benedict's desire for dialogue, observers also noted his deliberate use of the term "reciprocal" -- a signal that he will not abandon his core challenge of "reciprocity," meaning respect for religious freedom, especially the rights of Christian minorities.

In early January, the pope's top official for inter-religious dialogue, French Cardinal Jean-Louis Tauran, told *L'Osservatore Romano* that a delegation of Muslim leaders will come to Rome in February or March to plan a historic session between Benedict XVI and a delegation of signatories to the letter for later in 2008.

Storm clouds, however, already have begun to gather over that session. On Jan. 9, Jesuit Fr. Khalil Samir, one of the Vatican's most influential advisors on Islam, published an essay with the "Asia News" service warning that Muslim organizers may be seeking "escape in theological dialogue" as a way of avoiding tough questions about human rights and religious freedom.

(5) Natural Law

Benedict XVI repeatedly insisted that social values such as peace, justice and human rights have to be anchored in natural law, meaning a universal moral truth that cuts across cultures and time.

"Law can be an effective force for peace only if its foundations remain solidly anchored in natural law, given by the Creator," Benedict told the diplomats on Monday.

In that speech, Benedict argued that the concept of natural law is implicit in many international declarations and agreements on human rights -- including the Universal Declaration on Human Rights, which marks its 60th anniversary in 2008.

In his message for World Peace Day, Benedict argued that grasping natural law does not require specifically religious convictions.

"Knowledge of the natural moral norm is not inaccessible to those who, in reflecting on themselves and their destiny, strive to understand the inner logic of the deepest inclinations present in their being," the pope said. "Albeit not without hesitation and doubt, they are capable of discovering, at least in its essential lines, this common moral law."

Natural law is likely to be a key theme in Benedict's April 18 address to the United Nations. The Catholic University of America is sponsoring a major conference on "A Common Morality" March 27-30, organized at the pope's request.

(6) Christ and Justice

Perhaps the signature touch in Benedict's social teaching is his insistence that efforts to build a just society are doomed to failure -- at times, monstrous failure -- without God, who is revealed in Christ.

"To the thirst for meaning and value so characteristic of today's world, to the search for prosperity and peace that marks the lives of all mankind, to the hopes of the poor: Christ -- true God and true Man -- responds with his Nativity," the pope said in his *Urbi et Orbi* address.

In his speech to the Curia, Benedict laid out his social vision.

"By coming to know Christ, we come to know God, and only beginning from God can we understand the human person and the world, a world that otherwise remains a question without an answer," he said.

"It's so important that in the 'balance sheet' of humanity, facing the sentiments and realities of violence and injustice that threaten us, opposing forces be aroused and reinvigorated," Benedict said. "Through the encounter with Jesus Christ and his saints, through the encounter with God, the balance sheet of humanity is reinforced by those forces of good without which all our efforts in the social order never become reality, but -- facing extraordinary pressures from other interests opposed to peace and justice -- remain abstract theories."

(7) "Affirmative Orthodoxy"

Finally, the holidays offered illustrations of what I've come to call Benedict XVI's "affirmative orthodoxy," meaning a defense of classic Catholic doctrine phrased in positive fashion.

The pope devoted his 3,000-word World Peace Day message, for example, to extolling the family based on marriage between a man and a woman, open to the gift of life, without once mentioning hot-button "family values" issues such as abortion and homosexuality. They were part of the subtext, but he allowed them to remain there, preferring to articulate a positive vision.

Another example came in Benedict's address to the Roman Curia, on evangelization.

Benedict argued that the motive for mission is not that people will otherwise be damned, but rather so that the Kingdom of God, with its promise of reconciliation and true happiness, may reach all humanity.

"St. Paul actually felt himself under a sort of 'obligation' to announce the Gospel, not so much out of concern for the salvation of individual non-baptized people who have not yet heard the Gospel, but rather because he was aware that history in its totality could not reach its fulfillment until all people were reached by the Gospel," Benedict said.

In his homily for the Dec. 31 vespers service, Benedict described an approach which could serve as a summary of affirmative orthodoxy: the key is proceeding, he said, "without making a lot of noise, and in patient confidence."

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Daily updates this week contain items of interest for "All Things Catholic" readers:

- "Vatican faces ticking clock on prayer for conversion of Jews": <http://ncrcafe.org/node/1530>
- "Natural law key to world peace, Benedict tells diplomats": <http://ncrcafe.org/node/1522>
- "Vatican to Jesuits: 'Think with the Church'": <http://ncrcafe.org/node/1521>
- An extended analysis of Benedict XVI's "affirmative orthodoxy" can be found here: <http://ncrcafe.org/node/1513>
- "Pope taps Princeton water expert, believer in global warming for science academy": <http://ncrcafe.org/node/1533>

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Finally, an item from the "no sense of humor" file: News wires moved a story this week about a private television program in Slovakia that's been slapped with a two million koruna fine (roughly \$88,000) for "abusing viewers' religious sensibilities."

Its crime? Poking fun of a recent set of "Ten Commandments for Drivers" issued by the Pontifical Council for Migrants and Itinerant Persons, which came in the middle of a lengthy document released over the summer treating a grab-bag of issues related to people on the move.

"Priests are not the best people" to give advice on rules of the road, the Slovakian TV program jokingly suggested, since the Vatican has "only two kilometers of highway, and the last traffic accident was more than half a year ago."

While there certainly is real anti-Catholicism in the world, it's hard to take this seriously as a case in point.

By the way, it's worth recalling that the eminent American Catholic writer George Weigel, certainly not someone given to wounding Catholic sensibilities, scathingly referred to the new-style Ten Commandments as "faux-theological blah-blah." In an August column, he also invited the pope to ponder whether such a bit of PR flourish "isn't an embarrassment to the Holy See, and an impediment to the church's evangelical mission."

Weigel might be well advised to stay off Slovakian TV for a while ? or to bring his checkbook.

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