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Benedict hopes to tap the 'creative minority' of French Catholics

John L. Allen Jr. | Sep. 5, 2008 All Things Catholic

[Note: John Allen will be covering Pope Benedict XVI's Sept. 12-15 visit to Paris and Lourdes in France, travelling on the papal plane. Watch the NCR web site for his daily reports.]

If, in some weird parallel universe, Pope Benedict XVI were to be a candidate this fall for President of the United States, he could mount a serious run. Polls say Benedict enjoys a 75 percent approval rating after a successful visit last April, he packs obvious appeal to "faith and values" voters, and it would be hard to question his international experience. In an election in which the Republican nominee is 72, even the pope's advanced age wouldn't necessarily be a drawback.

In terms of the red meat of American politics, however, he would have at least one problem: He's far too pro-French.

In 1997's *Salt of the Earth*, Joseph Ratzinger proudly recalled that his family belonged to a current in Bavaria which looked to France rather than Prussia as its point of reference. The pope himself speaks nearly flawless French, and although his deep religious identity clashes with the ultra-secular spirit of French *laïcité*, he's nevertheless admired for his cerebral prowess; this is a nation, after all, where intellectuals are rock stars. Since 1992, Benedict XVI has been a member of the prestigious Academy of Moral and Political Sciences of the Institute of France. Then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger was elected to the body in 1992, taking the seat vacated by the death of Russian intellectual and human rights activist Andrei Sakharov.

To be sure, Benedict XVI is not entirely immune to the clash of cultures between the Germans and the French. For example, his strongest criticism of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) came in his reaction to *Gaudium et Spes*, the "Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World," which he saw as excessively beguiled by French theology, especially the optimism of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin.

Nonetheless, when Benedict XVI touches down at Orly Airport one week from today for his first visit to France as pope, he will arrive as a veteran Francophile. His Sept. 12-15 journey to Paris and Lourdes, to celebrate the Marian sanctuary's 150th anniversary, can be said to have three levels of significance, arrayed around one another like concentric circles:

- Europe
- France

- Lourdes

We'll take a brief look at each.

Europe

Whenever a pope travels to a country in Europe, there's always a continental dimension to his message. That will be especially true in this case, since France currently holds the rotating EU presidency.

Benedict arrives at a moment of particular European crisis, triggered by the conflict between Russia and Georgia over the breakaway enclaves of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. As fate would have it, Benedict's Sept. 12 encounter with President Nicolas Sarkozy at the Elysée will come just four days after the French leader's scheduled diplomatic mission to Moscow and Tbilisi.

Benedict XVI addressed the crisis three Sundays in a row during his Angelus remarks in August, beginning during the worst of the fighting, on August 10, when he urged a cease-fire. One week later, the pope called for the engagement of the international community, especially the EU, and the opening of humanitarian corridors. On August 24, Benedict warned against "a return to nationalistic confrontations that have caused such tragic consequences throughout history."

In broad strokes, the Vatican supports a policy of "constructive engagement" with Russia. The Holy See clearly does not want a return to Cold War-era tensions, and not just for the obvious humanitarian reasons, nor for the more craven motive of some EU powers -- specifically, growing depending on Russian oil. (According to the *Financial Times*, Russia now supplies almost most 40 percent of the EU's gas imports.)

Instead, the top ecumenical priority of both Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI has been improved relations with Orthodoxy, above all with the Russian Orthodox Church. In that regard, a growing anti-Western humor in Russia is not helpful. Benedict can be expected to support Sarkozy's efforts to act as a go-between, and in general to back the policy of France, Germany and Italy of keeping lines of communication open.

Another issue that will likely be on the table is Benedict's concern with immigration. He addressed the point during his Angelus remarks on August 31, following news that 70 African immigrants were missing and presumed dead after a rubber boat they had used in an attempt to cross the Mediterranean capsized.

Benedict argued that countries of origin should address the root causes of immigration and stamp out the criminality associated with it. At the same time, he said, host nations are obligated to welcome immigrants in a spirit of human solidarity. Benedict insisted that immigrants should be recognized as a "unique good, always precious, [who] must be protected against the grave risks to which they're exposed in their search for a better life."

Immigration has long been a bone of contention in France, which has one of the highest percentages of foreign-

born residents in Europe, with a disproportionate share being North African Muslims. Sarkozy has a history of playing on popular anxieties about the country's growing Islamic presence. During the 2007 elections, for example, he said: "When you live in France, you respect her republican rules, you don't practice polygamy, circumcise your daughters or slaughter sheep in your bathroom."

In that light, any reference from the pope to immigration policy is likely to elicit sharp interest from French journalists and politicians.

Finally, Benedict is sure to call for a revival of the Christian roots of Europe. While that's an old theme, this may be a new moment in which to make the argument. All three major continental powers -- France, Germany and Italy -- are now governed by center-right coalitions more open than in the past to talking publicly about their nation's Christian heritage. (Ironically, both France and Italy are led by conservative Catholic politicians, largely favorable to the church, who have divorced and remarried without a church annulment.)

France

The state of the French church has long been a source of Vatican anxiety. Mass attendance rates are estimated to be less than ten percent, and 60 percent of the French say they "almost never" attend religious services. There are officially 46 million French Catholics, but according to the Pew Forum, just 40 percent of the French self-identify as Catholic, which works out to 28 million -- meaning that some 20 million French were born Catholic but no longer think of themselves that way. The most recent Pew survey found that just 11 percent of the French rate religion as "very important" in their lives, the lowest level in Europe.

Frederic Lenoir, editor-in-chief of *Les Monde des Religions*, recently concluded that, "In its institutions, but also in its mentalities, France is no longer a Catholic country."

Given those realities, church leaders have adopted a two-pronged policy: Kindling what Benedict XVI has called a "creative minority," meaning a Catholic core reduced in size but passionate about its identity, while striving to open a few small cracks in the culture of *laïcité* so this renewed Catholic presence can find some breathing room.

As evidence that something is stirring, when Pope John Paul II convened a May 1998 assembly of "new movements" in St. Peter's Square, 250 such movements were represented -- with almost 150, or 60 percent, tracing their origins to France. Perhaps the best-known is the Emmanuel Community, founded by French layman Pierre Goursat in 1976. (Goursat, by the way, believed he was healed of tuberculosis in 1944 at Lourdes. He died in 1991.) Observers also point to a new generation of "John Paul II priests" in France, many of whom were first energized by the late pope's 1995 visit for World Youth Day.

France is also one of the few European nations bucking the trend to ever-lower birth rates. Today France has one of the highest fertility rates in Europe, and if that holds, by mid-century France should surpass Germany as Europe's largest nation.

Benedict XVI will encourage these signs of life, and not simply because France has a rich Catholic tradition. A

revitalized French church could also be a key point of reference for Francophone Catholicism around the world, especially in Africa. The Democratic Republic of the Congo, for example, is destined to be one of the Catholic powerhouses of the 21st century. By 2050, it will be the fifth largest Catholic country in the world, at 97 million Catholics, behind only Brazil, Mexico, the Philippines, and the United States. Other sizeable French-speaking Catholic populations are found in Burundi, Madagascar, Haiti, Rwanda, Vietnam and Cameroon, in addition to Belgium to Quebec.

Overall, by 2050 the Catholic population of the 40 nations where French is a principal language will be roughly 280 million, making it 18 percent of the total Catholic population worldwide. Given the youthful demographics of African nations, one might say that Francophone Catholicism in the 21st century could become "the Youngest Daughter of the Church."

The Vatican would obviously like to see the mother country take an interest in these young churches, but that will require ecclesiastical vitality in France itself.

In terms of French politics, the wind today seems to be at the church's back. Sarkozy has lauded the "immense patrimony of cultural, moral, intellectual and spiritual values" of French Catholicism, and is not shy about invoking the Christian roots of Europe -- a point France notoriously resisted inserting in the preamble to the new European constitution. In that light, one French newspaper recently opined that France is exiting a long "purgatory" in relations with the Vatican.

Sarkozy's opening to the church, it should be noted, is not without its critics. When he visited Benedict XVI in Rome in December 2007, the main French daily Le Monde ran a front-page cartoon showing Sarkozy dressed as a bishop, with U.S. President George Bush in the background toting a Cross and an American flag, saying, "I think this guy is stealing my job."

While in France, Benedict XVI is likely to make a reasoned case for what he calls a "healthy secularism" -- one that respects the legitimate autonomy of the secular sphere, without denying the cultural identity of the nation or exiling religion from public life.

Lourdes

In brief, the story of Lourdes begins in 1858, when tradition holds that the Virgin Mary appeared to a 14-year-old peasant girl named Bernadette Soubirous, who reported 18 such appearances over seven months. Among other things, Mary is said to have revealed a spring with miraculous powers. For that reason, Lourdes has become the preeminent healing shrine in the Christian world. Tens of thousands of cures have been attributed to Lourdes, although church authorities have only officially certified 68.

Benedict's trip to Lourdes affords him a chance to reflect upon two key aspects of Catholic spirituality: the Virgin Mary, and the theology of suffering.

When it comes to Mary, the pope concedes that he has undergone a conversion process. Ratzinger said in a 2000

interview that when he was a young priest and theologian, influenced both by the Christocentric nature of the liturgical movement in the early 20th century and by the Protestant ethos of German-language theology, he was skeptical about Marian devotion. In fact, some of his cattiest language about Vatican II came in his 1964 commentary on the second session, when he wrote that calls for new Marian titles and consecrations of the world to Mary did not reflect well upon the "theological enlightenment" of the bishops.

In the 2000 interview that became the book *God and the World*, however, Ratzinger said: "The older I am, the more the Mother of God is important to me and close to me." Asked in that same interview what Mary means to him personally, Ratzinger replied: "An expression of the closeness of God."

In some form, Benedict XVI is likely to reflect in Lourdes on six arguments he first offered in 1984, while still prefect of the Vatican's doctrinal office, in support of calls for a renewal of Marian doctrine and devotion:

- Marian dogma and tradition points to, and protects, the church's teaching about Christ. For example, Ratzinger argued, the dogma of Mary's Immaculate Conception is a way of defending the teaching that Christ was both true God and true Man, because it means that she who would bring Christ into the world was set apart from all time for this purpose. Further, he said, it also underscores the Redemption -- Mary was the first, he said, to enjoy the restored relationship with God, the being "full of grace," that Christ promises to all. (As a footnote, tradition holds that when Mary appeared to Bernadette, she announced herself as "the Immaculate Conception."
- Marian doctrine illustrates the proper relationship between scripture and tradition. Dogmas such as the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption have their roots in scripture, Ratzinger said, but have flowered and developed over the course of time.
- As a Jewish girl who became the mother of Christ, Mary is, according to Ratzinger, the prototype of both Jewish-Christian relations and the unity of the Old and New Testaments.
- Marian devotion fosters a spirituality rooted not just in the head but in the heart, thereby insulating Christianity against rationalistic and Puritanical tendencies.
- Mary is an archetype of the church as a loving mother, Ratzinger said, as opposed to a bureaucratic institution or an arena for socio-political struggle.
- Mary is a model for women, Ratzinger said, who ensures the feminine element in Christianity.

Among the world's Marian shrines, Lourdes has a special place in Benedict's heart -- in part because of the book *The Song of Bernadette*, published in 1942 by a German-speaking Czech Jew named Franz Werfel. When World War II broke out, Werfel and his family took refuge in Lourdes. Hunted by the Gestapo, they were sheltered by a series of French families who told Werfel the story of Bernadette. Though he never converted to Catholicism, Werfel nonetheless developed a deep devotion to Bernadette; in part, historians say, he hoped his book would be a counter to a best-selling polemic on Lourdes written by Emile Zola, who denounced what he saw as the commerce and superstition of the place. Benedict, who lived through the war years himself, has said Werfel's book had a strong impact on him.

Perhaps the most extended reflection from Ratzinger on Lourdes came in *God and the World* eight years ago, and it's worth quoting at length:

> *"The story of Lourdes is for me particularly moving ? This simple girl, who brought nothing for her part but a great inward purity, [was] surrounded in the century of rationalism by a very crude and anticlerical rationalism, but also confronted by skeptical church authorities who, at first, quite*

> *rightly, acted only with great caution. In this somewhat cold spiritual climate, in fact almost freezing, she was able to introduce the face of the Mother of God. In the sign of the living, healing water, she also shows us a sign the saving power of creation, which is reawakened by Mary herself?.*
>
> That Christianity is made comprehensible as a religion of the heart, and as a healing reality, in which the simple soul becomes the seeing soul, remains for us a great sign. ? People still come into contact there, again and again, with the mystery of Christ. In this healing water they are referred back anew to the great and healing waters of baptism, which is the real new wellspring, a gift to us from Christ."

Because of the springs, Lourdes acts as a magnet for sick and disabled pilgrims from all over the world longing for a cure. It's a rare place in which the ill and infirm are the norm, and the healthy who stand out, whose presence almost seems to require an explanation. The city caters to the sick and the disabled, including special lanes in the streets for wheelchairs rather than bicycles.

For that reason, Lourdes is also an obvious setting for popes to reflect on suffering, often referred to in Christian spirituality as the "theology of the Cross." That dimension came out in especially clear form during John Paul II's 2004 visit, when the ailing pope declared himself "a sick man among the sick."

In brief, Benedict is likely to argue that suffering should obviously be resisted as much as possible, but where it is unavoidable, the proper Christian disposition is to accept suffering with hope, uniting one's own pain with that of Christ on the Cross. In that sense, suffering can have a positive spiritual value.

Benedict's most recent reflection on suffering came in his November 2007 encyclical Spe Salvi, and it's likely his remarks in Lourdes will include some of the same ideas. The pope wrote:

> *Certainly we must do whatever we can to reduce suffering: to avoid as far as possible the suffering of the innocent; to soothe pain; to give assistance in overcoming mental suffering ? but to banish it from the world altogether is not in our power.*
>
> The true measure of humanity is determined in relationship to suffering and to the sufferer. This holds true both for the individual and for society. A society unable to accept its suffering members and incapable of helping to share their suffering is a cruel and inhuman society. Yet society cannot accept its suffering members and support them in their trials unless individuals are capable of doing so themselves; moreover, the individual cannot accept another's suffering unless he personally is able to find meaning in suffering, a path of purification and growth in maturity, a journey of hope?
>
> The capacity to suffer depends on the type and extent of the hope that we bear within us. The saints were able to make the great journey of human existence in the way that Christ had done before them, because they were brimming with great hope.

John Allen is covering Pope Benedict XVI's visit to Paris and Lourdes in France Sept. 12-15. There is no column today, but Allen is providing postings from France.

Throughout the weekend, read all the stories in his daily news column: **John L Allen Jr Daily Column** [1]. (Paste this link into your browser: http://ncrcafe.org/blog/2682). Stories Allen has already filed include:

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? **Pope in France: A lesson in 'Marian cool'** [2]

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? **Pope offers prayerful meditation on Eucharist: Jesus 'past, present and future'** [3]

? **Pope in France: Traditionalists deserve 'a place in the church'** [4]

? **The Cross, Mary, and hope for 'new vigor' in the Churchy** [5]

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? **Benedict makes a case for 'healthy secularism'** [10]

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(**Editor's Note:** Some stories are double posted, on NCRonline.org and on NCRcafe.org.)

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