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In Jordan, Benedict can find partners against extremism

Sue Stanton | May. 6, 2009

Commentary. When Pope Benedict XVI begins his three day stay in Jordan on May 8, an opportunity exists to showcase the moderate voices in that country. Including Jordan on his itinerary can add a firmer foundation to shifting sands.

President George W. Bush spoke repeatedly of the ?moderate voices? in the Arab world that struggled to be heard, yet little real recognition or understanding of those voices was ever expressed. With Benedict?s visit to the Middle East, one hopes that will change.

Those who have been working hard for Islamic reform as an antidote to extremism will be noticed as the pope sets foot on the soil of a country that has been the steadily beating heart of a rising movement.

Can Benedict grasp what it will take to begin a new conversation with a country that is 93 percent Muslim? Can he put aside his preconceived ideas of what should take place?

Unlike many Islamic leaders, Jordan?s King Abdullah II claims direct descent from the Prophet Mohammad and is charged as a matter of his office with the defense of Islam. He created the Amman Message in 2004, an initiative for peace in which the highest principles from the Quran were presented for study and reflection.

Initially published in the hopes of bridging extremes, it became apparent that the Amman Message could also be useful for Christians as a quick introduction to the Quran, a book many Americans picked up after 9/11, and then promptly put down with more confusion than ever about Islam.

If Pope Benedict truly believes in a partnership with Muslims that will defend the need for religion in a world fast becoming overwhelmed by capitalism, agnostics and atheistic fervor, he will find ready partners in Jordan. Muslims and Christians throughout the leadership and clerical ranks in the Middle East are worried about the absence of their youth at prayer times and church services as the young migrate out of an area with continuing conflict and no real future prospects.

Bullets and bombs don?t discriminate between Arab Muslims and Arab Christians as Jordan learned in November, 2005 when three of their hotels were attacked. Despite efforts to destabilize the government of Jordan, then leader of Al Qaeda in Iraq, Jordanian Al Zarqawi, was disowned by his Jordanian relatives. In response to terrorist?s threats, thousands of Jordanian Christians and Muslims turned out to show support for the government -- a clear expression of the interconnected nature of Muslim countries.

If there is to be a papal plea for Islam to denounce violence and accept the legitimacy of religious freedom, the Jordanians are likely to be insulted since they see themselves collectively as one people under siege, as their home-grown population is displaced by tidal waves of refugees from conflicts not of Jordan?s making.

If Benedict believes he can suggest, as a well-meaning friend, that Islam reform itself from within, he better think twice.

Hopefully, he will have been briefed about those moderate voices within Jordan who have been working hard on reform all these years and who have been trying to be heard above the shouts of extremists.

Jesus spoke and taught in parables. There is no secret language Pope Benedict needs to learn to reach the Arab street. He can bring his brand of love to that suffering world, the kind that gives encouragement and hope.

[Sue Stanton has worked as an independent researcher, consultant and peace activist among individuals living in Jordan, Israel and Palestine. She has been active in interfaith dialogue efforts in the Middle East and the United States for several years.]

Editor's note: *NCR's coverage of Pope Benedict's May 8-15 trip to the Middle East begins tomorrow with reports from senior correspondent John L. Allen Jr., who will be traveling with the pope. Watch NCRonline.org for daily postings.*

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