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Pope in Israel mends fences, but doesn't pull punches

John L. Allen Jr. | May. 11, 2009

Pope Benedict XVI waves upon his arrival at Ben Gurion airport in Tel Aviv, Israel. (CNS/Reuters)

Tel Aviv/Jerusalem, Israel

Especially in light of the recent uproar about Benedict XVI's rehabilitation of a Holocaust-denying bishop, a key drama heading into his visit to Israel was whether the pontiff's need to mend fences with Jews would blunt his message about a just resolution to the Israeli/Palestinian conflict, especially the "two-state solution."

Another way of putting that question is whether Benedict would emphasize the past or the future, the memory of the Holocaust or the present reality of the Middle East. Today the pope seemed to provide an answer, which was: He'll do both.

Shortly after his arrival at Tel Aviv's Ben Gurion Airport, Benedict honored the memory of the "six million Jewish victims of the Shoah" and insisted that "every effort must be made to fight anti-Semitism wherever it is found."

Later, Benedict paid tribute to the victims again within a visit to Yad Vashem, Israel's main Holocaust memorial, insisting that their suffering "never be denied, belittled or forgotten" ? the closest he came to a reference, however indirect, to the controversy surrounding traditionalist Bishop Richard Williamson, who has claimed that the Nazis didn't use gas chambers and that six million Jews didn't die during the Holocaust.

"May the names of these victims never perish!" the pope said. "May all people of goodwill remain vigilant in rooting out from the heart of man anything that could lead to tragedies such as this!"

Back at the airport, however, the pope also offered a fairly direct endorsement of the two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, wading directly into the political crisis of the Middle East.

With Israeli President Shimon Peres and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu looking on, Benedict XVI prayed that "both peoples may live in peace in a homeland of their own, within secure and internationally recognized borders."

That comment comes at a time when Netanyahu's new government is sending mixed signals about its

commitment to Palestinian statehood.

Echoing another long-standing article of the Vatican's diplomatic position, Benedict said he hoped that "all pilgrims to the holy places will be able to access them freely and without restraint, to take part in religious ceremonies and to promote the worthy upkeep of places of worship on sacred sites."

The traditional Vatican formula for the holy sites has been the desire for an "internationally guaranteed special status."

Later in the day, in a meeting with Peres at the Presidential Palace in Tel Aviv, Benedict argued that security depends upon justice, invoking the Hebrew term batah, meaning not just the absence of threat but a sensation of "calmness and confidence."

"Security, integrity, justice and peace: In God's design for the world, these are inseparable," the pope said. Benedict warned against the influence of "particular interests or piecemeal politics," urging the peoples of the region to recognize one another as "my equal, my brother, my sister."

The pope also said he wanted to address the ordinary families of Israel.

"What parents would ever want violence, insecurity, or disunity for their son or daughter?" he asked. "What humane end can ever be served through conflict and violence?"

"I hear the cry of those who live in this land for justice, for peace, for respect for their dignity, for lasting security, a daily life free from the fear of outside threats and senseless violence," the pope said.

All in all, it seemed Benedict XVI was determined today to hit the ground running ? outlining what will be the main themes of his four-day visit to Israel and the Palestinian Territories, after wrapping up three days in Jordan.

The pope's language on the Holocaust was forceful.

"It is right and fitting that, during my stay in Israel, I will have the opportunity to honor the memory of the six million Jewish victims of the Shoah, and to pray that humanity will never again witness a crime of such magnitude."

Similarly, the pope's commitment to fight anti-Semitism, and all forms of intolerance, seemed unambiguous.

"The church is committed to praying and working tirelessly to ensure that hatred will never reign in the hearts of men again," he said during his visit to Yad Vashem. In reflecting on the importance of remembering the victims by name, Benedict said they fell prey to a "horrific tragedy" based upon an "insidious web of lies."

To what extent Benedict's comments on the Holocaust, and on anti-Semitism, will satisfy Jewish sensitivities, is not yet clear. On the eve of his arrival, Jewish reaction to Benedict's visit appeared divided.

Rabbi Abraham Cooper, from the U.S.-based Simon Wiesenthal Center, said on the "Huffington Post" web site that Benedict's pilgrimage "presents an opportunity for Jews to acknowledge that today, this church, once a main source of anti-Semitism, openly recognizes our people's right to pursue its unique historic and spiritual destiny."

Yet a Israel-based group called the "Task Force to Save the Nation and Land," headed by Rabbis Yaakov Yosef and Shalom Dov Wolpe, sent a telegram to Israel's two Chief Rabbis protesting their plans to meet the pope.

"This involves a desecration of God's Name? The very meeting and recognition of him is related to idol

worship, if not outright idol worship, and involves a sin that one must die for and not violate," the protesting rabbis wrote.

Later this evening, Benedict was scheduled to take part in an inter-faith meeting at Jerusalem's Notre Dame Center, a pilgrimage and ecumenical center which was entrusted by the late Pope John Paul II to the Legionaries of Christ in 2004.

Tomorrow, Benedict XVI will visit both the Dome of the Rock and the Western Wall, holding meetings with the Grand Mufti and the two Grand Rabbis of Jerusalem, and celebrate a Mass near the Mount of Olives.

John L. Allen Jr. is *NCR* senior correspondent. His traveling with Pope Benedict XVI in Jordan, Israel and the Palestinian Territories May 8-15. Read NCRonline.org daily for his dispatches from the Holy Land.

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Today, Benedict belonged to the Palestinians [4] (May 13)

Pope strikes new balance in the Old City [5] (May 12)
The pope and the Hitler Youth, in Benedict's own words [6] (May 12)
Analysis: Benedict's timeless touch noble, but tricky [7] (May 12)

At Yad Vashem, what pope doesn't say makes waves [8] (May 11)
Pope in Israel mends fences, but doesn't pull punches [9] (May 11)

Pope calls on Mideast Christians to perservere [10] (May 10)

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