

Pope strikes new balance in the Old City

John L. Allen Jr. | May. 12, 2009



Pope Benedict XVI stands in front of the Dome of the Rock, on the compound known to Muslims as Noble Sanctuary and to Jews as Temple Mount, in the Old City of Jerusalem May 12. The pope removed his shoes before entering the Dome of the Rock, a seventh-century shrine that protects an exposed rock revered by Muslims as the place from which Mohammed ascended to heaven.

Jerusalem

One theme of Pope Benedict XVI's week-long visit to the Holy Land has been outreach to both Muslims and Jews, and today brought the week's most delicate balancing act: Visits to both the Dome of the Rock and the Western Wall, neighboring sites in Jerusalem's Old City sacred to Islam and Judaism, respectively, as well as meetings with both the city's Grand Mufti and Grand Rabbis.

Though Benedict XVI has met both Muslims and Jews before, meeting them both on the same day, and in two of the holiest sites on earth for each faith, was a novelty.

At the level of symbolism, Benedict tried to offer just the right touch in both places.

At the Dome of the Rock, a sanctuary housing the rock from which Muslims believe Muhammad ascended to Heaven, Benedict removed his shoes. (The fact that he didn't take them off at the Hussein-bin-Talal mosque in Jordan, even though his hosts told him he didn't need to, caused a brief frisson.)

The pontiff also began his address this morning in what Muslims call the "noble sanctuary," the square outside the Al-Aqsa mosque, by saying, *As-salamu ʿalaikum*, meaning "peace be upon you," the traditional Islamic greeting.

At the Western Wall, Benedict followed the lead of his predecessor, the late Pope John Paul II, and left behind a note in the wall with a written prayer. In this case, Benedict prayed for "peace upon this Holy Land, upon the Middle East, and upon the entire human family."

Benedict's effort at balance even extended to the length of the pope's talks. His speech to the Grand Mufti was

775 words long, while the address to the Grand Rabbis was 763.

Perhaps by doing the two events separately, Benedict managed to steer clear of the sparks that sometimes flare when Muslims and Jews rub shoulders in Jerusalem.

The pope got a taste of that tension last night during an inter-faith session at the Notre Dame Center in Jerusalem, when a sheikh named Tayssir Attamimi, chief Islamic judge in the Palestinian Territories, used the occasion to unleash a heated diatribe about alleged Israeli atrocities, inviting Christians and Muslims to join forces against the Jewish state. Ironically, Attamimi made similar remarks during Pope John Paul II's 2000 visit to the Holy Land. On this occasion, the Vatican released a statement calling his comments "a direct negation of what dialogue should be."

Some early media reports suggested that Benedict had walked out of the inter-faith meeting in protest, but in fact Benedict was scheduled to leave at that moment. After Attamimi was encouraged to stop speaking, Benedict rose to leave, shaking Attamimi's hand on the way out. (Since Attamimi was speaking in Arabic, it's doubtful that the pontiff understood much of what he said, though it was obviously impassioned.)

In his speech this morning to the Grand Mufti and other Muslim leaders, Benedict urged "a sincere dialogue aimed at building a world of justice and peace for coming generations."

One distinctive touch in Benedict XVI's approach to relations with other faiths is a preference for what he's called "inter-cultural," rather than "inter-religious," dialogue, on the grounds that the latter risks compromising the unique identity of each tradition. The former emphasizes shared values and cooperation in the social, cultural, and political arenas.

In his speeches to both Jews and Muslims today, Benedict seemed to strike a strong "inter-cultural note" ? even if the appeal was more explicit with the Grand Rabbis.

Referring to "our shared concern in the face of moral relativism and the offences it spawns against the dignity of the human person," Benedict said that "in approaching the most urgent ethical questions of our day, our two communities are challenged to engage people of good will at the level of reason, while simultaneously pointing to the religious foundations which best sustain lasting moral values."



Benedict also called upon Jews and Christians to "heighten society's

appreciation of the distinctive contribution of our religious and ethical traditions."

With the Muslims, Benedict's invitation to join the struggle against what he has famously described as a "dictatorship of relativism" was more subtle, with the pontiff simply referring to how Islam and Christianity both cherish "the law inscribed in the cosmos and implanted in the human heart."

Later in the day, the pope spoke to Catholic bishops in the Holy Land along with Franciscans responsible for the custody of the holy sites. It was an occasion for Benedict to once again encourage Christians to persevere, despite decades of out-migration that some refer to as a Christian "exodus" out of the region.

The pope told local Christians that their presence "is of vital importance for the good of society as a whole."

"Christians in the Middle East, together with other people of good will, are contributing, as loyal and responsible citizens, in spite of difficulties and restrictions, to the promotion and consolidation of a climate of peace in diversity," the pope said.

Benedict XVI also celebrated Mass today at a location near the Mount of Olives. Tomorrow, he makes a much-anticipated visit to Bethlehem, the traditional birthplace of Jesus, which is located on the West Bank within the Palestinian Territories. The pontiff will say Mass, visit a Palestinian refugee camp, and meet President Mahmoud Abbas of the Palestinian National Authority.

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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