

Three great ironies about Benedict's Holy Land visit

John L. Allen Jr. | May. 15, 2009



Pope Benedict XVI kisses the Stone of Unction, the site where Jesus' body was prepared for burial, in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem's Old City May 15. (CNS/Reuters)

Jerusalem

After the most demanding high-wire act of his papacy, a grueling week that saw the 82-year-old pontiff deliver 28 speeches while shuttling among Jordan, Israel and the Palestinian Territories, it seems terribly simplistic to offer a report card, but here we go nonetheless: Give Benedict XVI an A for effort, and a B for execution.

Benedict scored gains in getting Catholic-Muslim relations back on track, especially in Jordan, and with a high-profile visit to the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem. He also offered forceful words on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, endorsing the two-state solution as a global moral consensus, and offered a shot in the arm to the struggling Christian population -- though how much any pope can do to bring peace to the Middle East, or to arrest the long-term demographic movement of Christians out of the region, is open to question.

In Israel, and in Catholic-Jewish relations, was there more ambivalence. The headline of an essay in today's *Jerusalem Post* summed things up by asking, "Why have so many Jewish leaders here been reluctant to accept the pope's gestures of dialogue and peace?"

Benedict's visit to Yad Vashem on Monday drew criticism from some Jewish commentators, mostly for what the pope didn't say -- no reference to Christian anti-Semitism, no reflection on his own biography as a German who saw the rise of Nazism, no regret for the recent affair involving a Holocaust-denying bishop. Some Israelis were also troubled by what they saw as the overtly political character of his visit to the Palestinian Territories, and by the way a local sheikh hijacked an inter-faith meeting in Jerusalem Monday night to deliver an anti-Israeli tirade.

Nonetheless, many Jewish and Israeli leaders declared themselves content. In effect, they argued, the very fact that Israelis weren't content just to see a pope at Yad Vashem, or at the Western Wall, is itself a sign of progress. It means that a pope coming to Israel is no longer a revolution or a cause célèbre, but rather an expression of a basically normal relationship.

Historically inclined Israelis see a progression from Paul VI's visit in 1964, when the pontiff refused to utter the words "state of Israel" or to refer to the country's president as anything other than "mister"; to John Paul in 2000, a trip that transformed relations; to Benedict in 2009, a visit reflecting a now-routine friendship, with its ups and downs, but fundamentally there's no turning back.

Talking to average Jordanians, Israelis and Palestinians, many seemed inclined to give the pope the benefit of the doubt. After all, they said, he didn't come here for his health; he came to try, as best he could, to speak a word of peace, and to remind the world of the importance of this region and its destiny. The world may not be different because of his visit, that's probably too high a bar for even a pope to cross.

Beyond that basic summary, there are three great ironies about Benedict's visit worth exploring.

Wordsmith pope has better luck with pictures

In the Gospel of John, Nathaniel asks Philip the provocative question, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" For Pope Benedict XVI, the answer to that question on the penultimate day of his May 8-15 voyage was clearly "yes."

The setting was an inter-faith meeting among Christians, Muslims, Jews, and Druze in Nazareth. Toward the close of the meeting, a song specially composed for the occasion was performed: "Salam, Shalom, Lord Grant Us Peace." It was a rousing number, and by the end, the religious leaders on stage were singing along, including the notoriously reserved Benedict XVI. For the last stanza, the rabbis, muftis, sheikhs, and bishops, with the pontiff in the middle of the group, stood on the stage and held hands.

It was arguably the best visual of the trip, and as it turns out, it was a last-minute addition to the program.

Rabbi Alon Goshen-Gottstein, director of an inter-faith institute in Jerusalem, said he had been concerned that the momentum of the trip was being squandered by various controversies, and wanted to do something to turn it around. Working through Jewish contacts, he proposed to the Vatican that a song for peace ought to be performed at the Nazareth event, including the iconic moment of the pope holding hands with a rabbi and a Druze sheikh.

"I told them, you need a visual," Goshen-Gottstein told NCR immediately after the event. "There should be a picture to correct what went wrong."

And thus it was that an occasionally PR-challenged pontiff got an impromptu assist from a Jewish rabbi.

Looking back over the week, it's ironic that this wordsmith pope, whose métier is generally ideas rather than images, often seemed to have more success at the level of symbolism.

During the first three days in Jordan, the iconic moment was the pope's visit to the Hussein bin-Talal Mosque in Amman, only the second mosque this pope has visited and just the third a pope has ever entered. Though Benedict said all the right things about Christian-Muslim harmony, his speeches in Jordan didn't offer any particularly new ideas; in fact, many observers thought the two best pieces of oratory came from Benedict's hosts, King Abdullah II and Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad.

Certainly from the Vatican's point of view, Ghazi's speech at the mosque, when he thanked Benedict for expressing "regret" after delivering a 2006 speech in which he quoted a Byzantine emperor linking Muhammad, the founder of Islam, to violence, was much appreciated. Privately, they touted it as "closing the book" on the Regensburg episode.

Attention to the symbolic register seemed to pervade this trip. A brief mini-fracas occurred in Jordan because the pope didn't take his shoes off at the mosque, even though it wasn't his idea. (As it turns out, his hosts had laid down strips on carpet for the pontiff and his party to walk along, so they told him he didn't need to take the shoes off.) Thus when the pope visited the Dome of the Rock on Tuesday, one of the three holiest sites in Islam, he immediately removed his shoes -- and because there was no live video feed, his spokesperson made sure to inform the press.

In terms of Jewish reaction, the pope's symbols weren't the problem. They weren't enough, however, to offset mixed reaction to his words -- perhaps because they had seen a pope do these things before.

Benedict visited the Yad Vashem Holocaust memorial in Jerusalem, meeting survivors and gazing sorrowfully at the pictures of the victims. He visited the Western Wall, pausing for a full one minute and twenty seconds of silent prayer and leaving behind a note in the wall praying for peace. He met the two Chief Rabbis of Israel on their home "turf."

Even so, the ultra-religious Shas party advised its ministers to stay away from papal events, claiming that to even show up would dishonor the memory of Holocaust survivors. Meanwhile, Tzohar rabbis, an orthodox movement in Judaism, asserted that Benedict should acknowledge that the very existence of the state of Israel is a theological "slap in the face" to Christianity -- because rather than suffering for not recognizing Jesus, the Jews have earned their own homeland.

That, however, didn't satisfy critics of the Yad Vashem speech -- a point that didn't sit well with some papal advisors.

"I was surprised, I have to say," Cardinal Walter Kasper, the Vatican's top official for relations with Jews, told NCR on Thursday. "There seems to be an attitude of, 'That's good, but it's not enough.'"

Cardinal John Foley, an American who serves as head of the Knights of the Holy Sepulchre, a group devoted to assisting the church in the Holy Land, is travelling in the papal party along with Kasper. He used similar language in reacting to critics of the Yad Vashem speech.

"I don't know what they're looking for," Foley told NCR. "The attitude seems to be, 'Thanks, but ?'"

Perhaps there's a lesson here for any leader visiting the Middle East: the great thing about symbols is that they're open to interpretation, whereas words carry fixed meanings that tend to invite dissection and debate.

An apolitical pope scores political points

Benedict XVI is notoriously resistant to attempts to turn the Catholic church into a political action committee, or the message of the Gospels into a revolutionary manifesto. At the outset of this trip, aboard the papal plane en route from Rome, he announced he was coming not as a politician but as a pilgrim.

Yet looking back, some of the pope's strongest moments came in the political arena.

His run began the moment he touched down at Tel Aviv's Ben Gurion airport, when he affirmed his support for the "two-state solution" to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Later that day, at a gala event hosted by Israeli President Shimon Peres at the presidential palace in Jerusalem, the pontiff pointedly advised the Israelis that true security depends upon justice.

The most overtly political day of the trip came on Wednesday, when Benedict travelled to Bethlehem in the

Palestinian-controlled West Bank. Among other things, he visited a Palestinian refugee camp -- a stop that had a pastoral dimension, to be sure, of offering comfort to suffering people, but one that also had obvious political subtext. That's all the more so because the Aida camp abuts Israel's almost 30-foot tall "security barrier," which the Palestinians call an "apartheid wall."

In his farewell address today, Benedict called the wall "one of the saddest sights" of his entire visit.

In the Aida camp, Benedict used the magic words of a "Palestinian state," and expressed sympathy for the desire of refugees to return home -- or, at least, to live in a homeland of their own. His criticism of the wall was especially strong, calling such barriers between peoples "tragic."

To be sure, Benedict also made points that cut in the direction of Israel's security concerns. Pointedly, he urged Palestinian youth to resist the lure of "acts of violence or terrorism."

During his departure address today, the pope called himself a friend both of the Israelis and the Palestinians, and then said in unusually impassioned terms: "No more bloodshed! No more fighting! No more terrorism! No more war!"

Of course, it would be unrealistic to expect Benedict to bring peace to the Middle East after one week-long journey. Waves of leaders from all over the world have crashed through here in the 61 years since the foundation of the State of Israel and the first Arab-Israeli war to try to make peace, and to date all have failed.

Nonetheless, the pontiff did make three points that in the context of a new Israeli government sending mixed signals, and a Palestinian leadership influenced by militant currents in Hamas, were undoubtedly worth making. Perhaps only a pope could make them:

- The two-state solution reflects a global moral consensus
- The wall between Israel and the Palestinian Territories is a tragic contradiction in an increasingly interconnected world, and must, sooner or later, come down.
- To retain moral credibility, the Palestinians must reject terrorism.

Whether all this will change things is anyone's guess, but at a minimum one can say that the bookish Benedict showed a fairly deft real-world political touch.

A pro-Israel pope has his toughest time in Israel

Perhaps the deepest irony of the week is that Benedict XVI is arguably the pope most inclined to be sympathetic to Israel since the Jewish state was founded six decades ago, yet the Israelis in some ways were his toughest crowd.

In the Vatican, there are essentially two cultural milieus: One associated with the Secretariat of State, composed of diplomats, and another that looks to the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, made up mostly of theologians. The diplomatic guild tends to tilt toward the Palestinians -- in part, because that's the default setting of European diplomats; in part, for reasons of social justice; in part, because they vast majority of Christians in the region are Arabs. The theologians tend to be more inclined to sympathy with Israel -- partly because some of them move in politically conservative circles, but more deeply because their concern for the Bible and for church tradition leads them to regard Judaism as the church's primordial inter-faith concern.

Benedict XVI is an avatar of that second, theological instinct. For this pope, the scriptural matrix of Christianity and its roots in Judaism are matters of deep importance. (Benedict used St. Paul's image of Christianity as a

shoot grafted onto the tree of Judaism in his farewell address this afternoon.) Moreover, Benedict has also cultivated respect for contemporary Jews and Judaism; the scholar he cites most positively in his recent book *Jesus of Nazareth*, for example, is Jewish writer Jacob Neusner.

Obviously, the late John Paul II felt a deep personal bond with Jews and Judaism, and many Jews loved him for it. Nonetheless, John Paul was also a political activist, and when it came to the politics of the Middle East he and his team were often sharply critical of Israel. Though Benedict XVI hasn't changed the substance of any Vatican positions, his own tone is often more moderate.

Benedict XVI thus arrived in Israel not only as a pope committed to theological and spiritual fraternity with Judaism, but also one less instinctively hostile to concrete Israeli policies than many other Catholic leaders.

Perhaps the point was invisible to most of the Israeli public, but local Palestinian Christians actually complained before, and during, the trip that the pope was caving in to Israeli sensitivities at every turn -- not travelling to Gaza, not protesting when the Israelis refused to allow the residents at Aida to erect the stage immediately below the wall, and not protesting when the Israelis closed down a Palestinian press center in East Jerusalem. Even his schedule reflected deference to Israeli sensibilities. Benedict made sure to fly out of Tel Aviv well before sundown on Friday, so as not to disrupt the Sabbath.

Most Israeli leaders seemed to recognize this, which is probably why they rushed to Benedict's defense when the criticism began. At the inter-faith event in Nazareth, for example, Bahij Masour, who heads the religious affairs division of Israel's Foreign Ministry, made a point of saying during his introduction that the pope "has clearly condemned anti-Semitism and denial of the Holocaust." Certainly Israel's President, Shimon Peres, went out of his way to be gracious to the pope, including hosting a lavish gala in his honor at the presidential palace in Jerusalem on Tuesday.

As Israelis sort through the images left behind by the pope's trip, perhaps more of this will become clear.

Kasper, at least, thinks so. Pressed as to who exactly holds the attitude he described above -- that nothing the pope does is ever enough -- Kasper replied, "the media and some official groups."

Not real people?

"No, not real people," he said, smiling.

John L. Allen Jr. is *NCR* senior correspondent. He traveled with Pope Benedict XVI in Jordan, Israel and the Palestinian Territories May 8-15.

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