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Off radar: Pope's teaching ministry has little media echo

John Thavis Catholic News Service | Jun. 22, 2009

VATICAN CITY

News coverage of Pope Benedict XVI tends to leap from big event to big event, so perhaps it's no surprise that after his Holy Land pilgrimage last month the German pontiff has fallen off the mainstream media radar.

To cite a single but typical example, in the month following the Holy Land trip the New York Times did not report about any of the pope's activities at the Vatican. Even in Italy, coverage of Pope Benedict has fallen off markedly.

The pope is likely to step back into the spotlight when he meets with President Barack Obama and when he issues his encyclical on social justice -- two major events expected in the first half of July.

But then the pope goes on vacation outside of Rome, and re-emerges only at the end of September with a visit to the Czech Republic. He doesn't completely disappear, of course; he continues to give talks and meet with individuals and groups. But the press will take little notice.

The pattern of media attention -- or lack of it -- has led some Vatican officials to privately lament what they see as a paradox of Pope Benedict's pontificate: the pope's primary focus and greatest talent is teaching, they say, but it's the kind of teaching that rarely breaks into the news cycle.

"You don't get soundbites from this pope, and that is a challenge to journalists. Another challenge is that he often speaks a language that presupposes faith," said one senior Vatican official.

One priest complained that controversies generated by such episodes as the rehabilitation of a Holocaust-denying bishop have detracted from the pope's newsmaking capability.

"They're not interested in him. I think part of the reason is that there is a prejudice there now," he said.

Whether or not the whole world is watching, the pope takes his day-to-day ministry seriously. As a sampler, here are four recent talks that received little or no coverage in the mainstream media, but which touched on essential themes of his pontificate:

-- God is love, and can be perceived in the created world. On June 7, the pope delivered another mini-lesson on this favorite topic, saying God can be sensed in the macro-universe of galaxies and planets as well as the micro-universe of cells and genetic material.

"God is wholly and only love, the purest, infinite and eternal love. He does not live in splendid solitude but is rather an inexhaustible source of life that is ceaselessly given and communicated," he said.

The reason he keeps hammering on this theme? Because he sees the rupture of the human being's relationship with God as the source of countless threats to the moral order in modern society.

-- Reason is open to truth, and Scripture can help lead it to truth. At his general audience June 10, Pope Benedict turned his attention to John Scotus Erigena, an obscure ninth-century Irish theologian and philosopher. The pope said Erigena outlined a process by which scriptural texts help bring "intelligent creatures toward the threshold of divine mystery," so that they can move beyond their own shortcomings "with the simple, free and sweet force of the truth."

Like Pope Benedict, Erigena believed that "true religion and true philosophy coincide," as the pope put it, and that authentic authority and reason can never really disagree, because they are both rooted in divine wisdom.

While the pope's arguments may go over the heads of many of the pilgrims in St. Peter's Square, they are an important part of his effort to convince contemporary society that rational thought is based on objective truth, and that the modern trend toward relativism marks a dangerous path.

-- The influence of secularization, even in the church's liturgy. Celebrating the feast of the Body and Blood of Christ June 11, the pope spoke of "the risk of a creeping secularization even inside the church, which can translate into a formal and empty type of Eucharistic worship." It was the second time he's made that point in recent weeks.

He added that a similar danger lay in "reducing prayer to superficial and hurried moments" in the midst of more mundane affairs.

The pope wants liturgy to be beautiful, but it's not simply a matter of aesthetics; it is beautiful, he says, because it's based on the truth -- the Eucharist as the body and blood of Christ.

For the pope, the liturgy is tied deeply to doctrine, and that was seen in an important appointment he made June 16, naming U.S. Dominican Father J. Augustine DiNoia as secretary of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Sacraments. Father DiNoia had been undersecretary at the doctrinal congregation; the new head of the worship congregation, Spanish Cardinal Antonio Canizares Llovera, was a leading member of the doctrinal congregation.

-- The need for a new global economic model. Addressing the "Centesimus Annus" Foundation June 13, the pope offered a preview of his upcoming social encyclical, saying that "certain economic-financial paradigms that have been dominant in recent years need to be rethought" so that more attention is paid to the rich-poor disparity in the world.

He took up the same theme the next day, saying that a U.N. financial summit in late June should promote a fairer distribution of resources and decision-making power to favor poorer countries.

The pope has repeatedly said the solution to the current global economic crisis will require lifestyle changes and "strategic choices that are sometimes not easy to accept." Given his previous remarks, some expect the

encyclical to challenge not only the obvious excesses and abuses of modern capitalism, but its philosophical underpinnings as well.

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