

Pope delivers upbeat message in ambivalent spot

John L. Allen Jr. | Sep. 26, 2009 NCR Today

By JOHN L. ALLEN JR.

Prague

In the first spiritually evocative moment of his itinerary in the Czech Republic, Pope Benedict XVI paid a visit early this afternoon to the Church of Our Lady of Victorious, home to the famed statue known as the "Infant of Prague."

The pope's words were warm and devotional, even if the setting has a somewhat more ambivalent place in the popular Czech imagination.

The 16th century statue of the child Jesus is known for its reported miraculous powers, but Benedict's remarks today dwelt instead on the reminder it offers of Christ's early years under the care of his parents, Mary and Joseph. That led Benedict to offer a few words about the families of his listeners "and all the families in the world, in their joys and difficulties."

"We pray for families in difficulty," Benedict said, "struggling with illness and suffering, for those in crisis, divided or torn apart by infidelity." Family harmony, the pope said, is important "for the true progress of society and for the future of humanity."

The infant Jesus also offers a reminder, Benedict said, that every human being is a child of God.

"May our society grasp this truth!" the pope urged. "Every human person would then be appreciated not for what he has, but for who he is, since in the face of every human being, without distinction of race or culture, God's image shines forth."

This theme of the family naturally led the pope into a reflection on children, calling them "the future and the hope of humanity" and warning against their "exploitation by the unscrupulous."

Strikingly, the pope did not make two points which typically surface whenever he ventures into the theme of the family: opposition to abortion and gay marriage. In general, Benedict's approach on the first day of his visit to one of the most secular nations on earth appears to be to stress the positive, presenting Christianity as a resource for a more humane society.

Though the pope's tone was upbeat and affirmative, some local observers noted that the venue this afternoon was a bit more ambiguous.

The "Church of our Lady Victorious" was originally built as a Lutheran church in 1613, at which time it was named for the Holy Trinity. The church was later reclaimed by Catholics and assigned to the Carmelites during the Counter-Reformation, after Protestant forces were defeated in the Battle of White Mountain in 1620.

In some ways, the Church of Our Lady Victorious became the symbol of what some Czechs remember as the

forced re-Catholicization of their nation under Jesuit missionaries and with the official backing of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The church is built in the Baroque style, an architecture associated with the Austro-Hungarian period that stands in contrast to the Gothic look of other Czech landmarks.

Indeed, the word 'victorious' in the name of the church recalls the Catholic triumphalism of that era, which still leaves a bad taste in some circles here.

Welcoming the pope, Prague's major, Pavel Bem, said that precisely because the Czech Republic 'has the reputation of being one of the most atheistic societies on earth,' the papal visit is 'an exceptional event' that means a great deal to us.

Both before and after his brief remarks, Benedict spent time greeting the Carmelites in the church, as well as ordinary Czech Catholics who gathered both outside and in the church itself. He was accompanied, as he will be throughout the trip, by the 77-year-old Cardinal Miloslav Vlk of Prague, who has announced that this will be his last major public event before retirement.

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