

The Hapsburgs were smiling from Heaven today

John L. Allen Jr. | Sep. 27, 2009 NCR Today

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Prague

Empires come and go, but even long after they crumble, one can occasionally catch a glimpse of their past glory. Assuming that the Hapsburgs, monarchs of the old Austro-Hungarian Empire, were looking down from Heaven upon a field near the Brno airport this Sunday, one can assume they were smiling.

(Officially speaking, Catholics can be reasonably sure that at least one Hapsburg had such a view from above. Karl I, the last Hapsburg monarch, was beatified by Pope John Paul II in 2004.)

Pope Benedict XVI presided over an open-air Mass in Brno this morning that drew a crowd estimated at roughly 120,000, composed of Czechs, Slovaks, Poles, Austrians and Germans, thus representing several of the constituent elements of the old Hapsburg empire (minus, of course, the Hungarians). Though those peoples are now scattered into different nations, today's Mass offered a reminder of a time when the common Christian faith of central Europe was also embodied in a common political identity.

Brno, located in the southeastern corner of the Czech Republic, is the center of the heavily Catholic region of Moravia. Benedict's Mass this morning is expected to be the largest public event of his three-day visit.

In one sign of how seriously the Czech government is taking the pope's presence, Benedict XVI arrived in Brno aboard the personal airplane of Czech President Vaclav Klaus, who also took part in the Mass.

In his homily, the pope did not wax nostalgic for the Hapsburg era — in part, perhaps, because for many Czechs, the three hundred years of Hapsburg rule are actually remembered as a period of imperial domination akin to the fifty years of Communist domination.

Instead, Benedict delivered what has, in effect, become his "stump speech" to the peoples of the former Communist zone: Congratulations on recovering their freedom, but a reminder that freedom is a means, not an end. To promote the common good, the pope argued, freedom must be ordered to truth, especially those truths expressed in the Christian values which are Europe's patrimony.

"Freedom has constantly to be won over for the cause of good," Benedict said, speaking in Italian. Throughout his Czech swing, Benedict has alternated between English and Italian rather than his native German — another reminder of the complicated relationship that Czechs have with their German-speaking neighbors.

"History has demonstrated the absurdities to which man descends when he excludes God from the horizon of his choices and actions," he said.

"Technical developments and the improvement of social structures are important and certainly necessary, but they are not enough to guarantee the moral welfare of society."

tQuoting his own 2007 encyclical *Spe Salvi*, Benedict said that the only "certain" and "reliable" hope for a more humane future "is founded on God."

t"Man needs to be liberated from material oppressions, but more profoundly, he must be saved from the evils that afflict the spirit," he said.

tThis afternoon, Benedict XVI will take part in an ecumenical meeting at the headquarters of the Prague archdiocese, an important gesture in a country divided between Catholics and Protestants, and whose national identity in some ways has been defined by resistance to Catholic domination following the Battle of White Mountain in 1620.

tBenedict will also deliver a much-anticipated address to the academic world this afternoon at Prague's famous Charles University, founded in 1348 by Emperor Charles IV. It will actually be the second time that he has delivered a lecture there - his first came in 1992, when then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger addressed the Catholic Theological Faculty.

One noteworthy coda to this morning's papal Mass: At the end, a group of roughly a dozen young Czech girls, clad in flowing white garments, performed a liturgical dance on the same stage where Benedict had celebrated. Known for his rather traditional liturgical taste, the pope actually missed most of the performance, since he was already making his exit in the Popemobile at the time.

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