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Benedict XVI confronts the ghost of Jan Hus

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tThough lengthy volumes have been written about Christian history in the Czech lands, the casual observer really only needs two words to understand the striking ambivalence that Catholicism often evokes here: Jan Hus.

t In America, ?Good King Wenceslas? is probably the single most famous figure from Czech history, owing largely to the popular Christmas carol. His memory lives on here too, but more commonly it?s the medieval preacher Jan Hus who is lionized as the real father of the Czech nation and the embodiment of its virtues. The fact that Hus was burned at the stake by the Catholic church in 1415 goes a long way toward explaining why, for some locals, being Czech and being hostile to Catholicism are practically the same thing.

tEven the most avowedly atheistic Czechs celebrate Hus as a nationalist founder. Ted Turnau, who teaches the sociology of religion at Charles University, says that in Czech schools still today, Hus is often presented as the father of the nation, and of resistance to outside domination, with only scant mention of his religious views.

tBorn in 1372 in Bohemia, Hus is widely acknowledged as a forerunner of the Protestant Reformation, sort of a prototype for Martin Luther. He encouraged reading the Bible in Czech, condemned the medieval practice of indulgences, and insisted that ?the church? is not merely the hierarchy but the entire fellowship of believers. Summoned to the Council of Constance to face charges of heresy, Hus refused to recant and was executed on July 6, 1415.

tSeveral leading Christian denominations in the country trace their origins to Hus, including, naturally, the Hussite Church. Hus? martyrdom has long been a sticking point, not only in ecumenical relations, but in broader tensions between Czech society and the church.

Prague?s Cardinal Miloslav Vlk has played a lead role in trying to heal that wound. Beginning in 1993, Vlk chaired a commission that studied Hus? life and legacy, with an eye towards reevaluation. In 1995, Vlk became the first official representative of the Catholic church ever to attend a memorial of Hus? death, held at the Bethlehem Chapel where Hus preached from 1402 to 1412. One year later, Vlk expressed regret in the name of all Czech Catholics for Hus? death.

Those efforts culminated in a three-day symposium dedicated to Hus in Rome in 1999, when Pope John Paul II issued a historic apology for his ?cruel death? and praised him for his ?moral courage.?

That history formed the backdrop to Pope Benedict XVI?s meeting this afternoon in Prague with leaders of other Christian churches in the Czech Republic, held at the headquarters of the Archdiocese of Prague.

In welcoming the pope, Pavel ?erný, a theologian with the Church of the Brethren and president of the Ecumenical Council of Churches in the Czech Republic, reminded Benedict that ?for centuries, the figure of Jan

Hus divided the churches and also the perception of history.? He thanked the Catholic church for the initiative of Pope John Paul II, which, ?erný said, brought ?his character and his struggle for the truth? to light, ?which still has something to say for our struggles today.?

As expected, Benedict alluded to the need to ?heal the wounds of the past,? and specifically referred to the 1999 Rome symposium on Hus.

?I pray that such ecumenical initiatives will bear fruit not only in order to persevere on the path to Christian unity, but for the good of the entire European society,? the pope said.

Benedict did not, however, offer any new apology for the death of Hus, or announce any new evaluation of Hus as a reformer.

In general, Benedict?s remarks to the ecumenical leaders were focused more on the present than the past. In the teeth of social currents that the pope said are trying to ?marginalize the influence of Christianity in public life,? he called on all Christians to join forces.

Christianity must present itself, Benedict said, as offering ?the spiritual and moral support that allows a meaningful dialogue with persons of other cultures and religions.?

European Christians, the pope suggested, have a particular contribution to make in that regard.

?When Europe sits down to listen to the story of Christianity, it hears its own story,? Benedict said. ?Its notion of justice, liberty and social responsibility, together with the cultural and legal institutions created to defend these ideas and to transmit them to future generations, have been shaped by its Christian legacy.

?In truth, its memory of the past animates its aspirations for the future,? Benedict said.

In effect, the pope?s calculation seemed to be that the best way for Catholics and the spiritual sons and daughters of Jan Hus to overcome their troubled past is to concentrate on common efforts in the here-and-now.

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