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Facing stormy seas, pope heads to Malta to recall a shipwreck

John L. Allen Jr. | Apr. 16, 2010 NCR Today

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Rome

tBenedict XVI arrives in Malta tomorrow to celebrate the memory of a shipwreck, and at the moment the pope could be forgiven for feeling like he?s on the brink of another one. In recent weeks, the ?Barque of Peter,? a traditional maritime image for the papacy, seems to be foundering on the choppy seas of the sex abuse crisis.

Benedict may well be hoping the Maltese show him the same ?rare humanity? with which the Acts of the Apostles say they received St. Paul almost two millennia ago.

The official motive for Benedict?s trip is to mark the 1,950th anniversary of Paul?s famous shipwreck on Malta while en route to Rome, an accident that led to the early Christianization of the Maltese archipelago and Malta?s emergence as one of the most homogenously Catholic cultures on earth. To this day, divorce is illegal, the EU has acknowledged Malta?s right to set its own policies on abortion, and the Catholic church is constitutionally recognized as the authoritative teacher of right and wrong in the country.

Not long ago, Benedict?s Maltese weekend thus loomed as a break from the storms besieging his papacy. In some ways, that?s still likely to be the case: The pope?s crowds should be large and enthusiastic, and absolutely no one in this country of 400,000, which is 94 percent Catholic, has suggested serving Benedict with an arrest warrant when he steps off the plane.

tYet even in this land of one church for every 1,000 residents, where members of parliament still kiss a crucifix upon taking office, the shadow of the sexual abuse crisis hangs over Benedict?s brief visit.

The Crisis

tPapal trips are generally carefully choreographed affairs, but at the outset of this April 17-18 journey one major bit of drama concerns whether Benedict will break from his pre-planned itinerary to add a meeting with victims of sexual abuse.

Doing so would arguably not only be good PR for the pope, but it would have strong local resonance. Malta, like so many other parts of the Catholic world, has recently been rocked by a sex abuse scandal ? in this case, a scandal centering on an orphanage where ten men say they were abused by Catholic priests in the 1980s and 1990s.

tSeveral of those men have asked for a meeting with the pope in order to close what they describe as a ?hurtful chapter.?

tMalta was recently served a shocking reminder of the possible fallout of that hurt when a 46-year-old named Gaetano Scerri, who recently completed a 20-year prison sentence for killing a man with a hammer in 1991 and

then cutting his body to pieces with a broken bottle, linked that horrific crime to abuse he suffered at St. Joseph orphanage in Santa Venera.

Scerri recently told a newspaper reporter that the ?the abuse, the rapes and the beatings? he suffered at the hands of priests at the orphanage ?made me a pitiless person, full of rage.?

Inevitably, the recent drumbeat of critical attention to the pope?s record on sex abuse cases, in tandem with the local crisis in Malta, have produced some local push-back to the pope?s trip. Last week, a few posters were defaced by someone who painted Hitler moustaches on the pope?s face and added the word ?pedophile.?

The Vatican spokesperson, Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi, said earlier this week that in principle Pope Benedict wants to meet victims, but that his time is limited in Malta and that journalists should not create ?great expectations? of a meeting.

?The general approach is that these meetings must be done calmly and intentionally, to create an atmosphere of discretion and reflection, not under media pressure,? Lombardi said. ?There must be the possibility of listening and personal communication.?

Recently, the Maltese church presented the first picture of sex abuse within its ranks, announcing it had received 84 allegations of child abuse allegedly involving 45 priests over the past decade.

tAside from the possibility of a meeting with victims, the world will also be watching to see if Benedict XVI addresses the sex abuse crisis, even indirectly, in his prepared remarks or in any off-the-cuff comments.

tEarlier this week, Benedict made his first allusion to the crisis since his pastoral letter to Ireland in mid-March.

t?We Christians, even lately, have often avoided the word ?penance,?? the pope said during a Mass in the Pauline Chapel this week, according to excerpts from his homily posted on Vatican Radio?s Web site.

?Now, under the attacks of the world that speak of our sins, we see that doing penance is grace and we see how penance is necessary,? he said.

Secularism and Catholic Identity

tThis weekend?s outing is Benedict?s fourteenth foreign voyage, and his eighth to Europe. Part of the reason for that, of course, is simply that Rome is in Europe, and it?s easier to travel within the continent. In part, however, it also reflects a strategic priority of Benedict?s papacy, which is the struggle against secularism and what he once memorably defined as a ?dictatorship of relativism? in the West, above all Europe.

tIn decades past, the church?s fight against secularism in Malta was a full frontal war. During most of the 1960s, members of the left-leaning Labor Party were officially excommunicated for trying to revoke some of the traditional privileges of the church. Today the battle is waged more on a cultural level rather than through formal interdict, but it?s no less fierce; in 2008, Archbishop Paul Cremona compared the battle against secularism to Malta?s earlier resistance to the Turks and the Fascists.

tThough Malta is still a Catholic stronghold, there are signs that secularism is nonetheless gaining ground.

tIn 2005, a church-run institute published the results of a census analyzing Mass attendance figures over the years. The results showed a considerable drop, with weekly Mass attendance rates falling from 72.7 percent in 1982 to 50.7 percent in 2005. In 1967, by way of comparison, the rate stood at almost 82 percent.

tIf you do the math, the drop from 1982 to 2005 works out to almost ten percent every decade, or one percent a

year. Though demographers usually caution that straight-line projections are dangerous, if that trend continues at its present pace, regular church-goers could find themselves a minority in Malta as early as 2015. That would amount to a remarkable social evolution in a relatively brief arc of time.

tA survey carried out by the *Malta Today* newspaper also found a steady drop in opposition to legal divorce over the last fifteen years. According to an October 2008 poll, the Maltese are fairly even divided, with 50.2 percent opposed to introducing divorce and 46 percent supporting it. Yet a survey held by TV program ?Xarabank? one month later showed a wafer thin majority (50.4 percent) in favor of divorce.

tSignificantly, the *Malta Today* survey showed that support for legal divorce is highest in the 18-34 age group, while opposition peaks among those older than 55 ? an indication, perhaps, of which way the social winds are blowing.

tA similar generational fault line seems to run through attitudes towards same-sex marriage. A *Malta Today* poll in 2007 found that 54 percent of Maltese under 34 favor same-sex marriage, while 82 percent of those over 55 oppose it.

tThe October 2008 poll also showed strong minorities or majorities favoring a host of other social measures the church opposes, including euthanasia for terminally ill patients and education on condoms and other means of birth control in Maltese schools. On the other hand, abortion is strictly illegal in Malta, and almost two-thirds of Maltese said they support that ban.

tThe Maltese themselves seem divided about the contemporary relevance of the country?s Catholic heritage.

tDominican Fr. Mark Montebello, a controversial priest with a high media profile, argues that while Malta has retained the visible trappings of its Catholic identity, on the ground the plates are shifting in favor of secularism.

?All that remains for the majority of the Maltese people is the folkloristic substance of the Catholic Church: its initiation rites, its colorful processions and liturgies, its exuberant religious feasts, and the like,? Montebello said. ?All of these seem to have become mostly unrelated to any act of belief or profession of faith.?

(For the record, Montebello has been repeatedly reprimanded by the Maltese province of the Dominicans and other officials for expressing positions out of line with church teaching.)

tOn the other hand, a chief justice emeritus of Malta?s Constitutional Court recently defended the country?s Catholic heritage in a fashion that would likely make Benedict XVI smile.

?The Catholic church in Malta has, since time immemorial, been the expression of the spiritual values of the people,? said Giuseppe Mifsud Bonnici. ?No doubt, a break away from that position will, I believe, bring about a substantial lowering of values which are not easily replaced.?

Immigration

tDuring a Vatican press briefing earlier this week, Lombardi said that immigration would also be an important them for Benedict XVI during his weekend in Malta.

tThe Maltese bishops have been struggling to stem a rising tide of anti-immigrant resentment. Cremona recently called upon his countrymen to ?eliminate prejudices and consider the immigrants as persons,? arguing that the welcome shown to St. Paul ?must be conserved and practiced in the current historical moment,? especially with respect to the waves of illegal immigrants from Africa who wash up on Malta?s shores.

tBecause of its Mediterranean location, Malta is a gateway to Europe, and thus a popular point of arrival for

immigrants from various parts of the world. In 2005 alone, an estimated 1,800 illegal immigrants reached Malta by boat, a stunning number for a county of just over 400,000 people.

A recent report found that every one illegal immigrant in Malta represents the equivalent of 1,129 in Germany and 1,749 in France, meaning that proportionately Malta has one of the largest populations of undocumented immigrants in all of Europe.

tBeyond the challenge of trying to provide accommodations for this wave of new arrivals, Malta also shoulders a disproportionate share of the European burden for executing seaborne rescues. The territory for which Malta is responsible for search and rescue is as large as that of the entire United Kingdom.

tIn a reflection of Malta?s unique situation, the European Union has chosen the island nation to host the European Asylum Support Office, essentially a legal resource center for immigrants claiming asylum in Europe.

tMassive waves of immigrants have, inevitably, produced anti-immigrant blowback, especially since Malta tries to market itself to Europe and the rest of the world as a prosperous, upscale tourist destination. Far-right political movements are growing in the small nation, and Maltese anthropologist Mark Anthony Falzon says that illegal immigration has stirred ?racist feelings? in the population.

tIn one sign of the tension surrounding immigration issues, Maltese journalist Herman Grech had to be provided with police protection after he publicly suggested that racist attitudes are behind some of the anti-immigrant sentiment in the country. Italian journalist Rolla Scolari has accused Malta of being ?the most racist country in Europe.?

tGenerally speaking, the Catholic church has taken a strongly pro-immigrant position, both in Malta and in other parts of the world. Aside from basic matters of social justice, that?s also because a substantial share of immigrants reaching Europe today are Africans, who usually bring a vibrant religiosity that stands in stark contrast to Europe?s dominant secular culture.

tBenedict XVI is expected to echo the call for welcoming immigrants in his remarks over the weekend.

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