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On the crisis, Benedict XVI changes the tone

John L. Allen Jr. | May. 11, 2010 Examining the Crisis

Lisbon, Portugal -- Not long ago, there was a brief flurry of speculation in the Italian media hinting that Benedict XVI was insulated from the full gravity of the sexual abuse crisis swirling around his papacy. Reports suggested the pope was getting only a carefully redacted daily press digest, producing a skewed impression of global discussion ? and in particular, perhaps, shielding the pope from grasping the negative fallout of the ?blame the messenger? commentary from some senior Vatican aides.

Tuesday morning, however, Benedict XVI seemed to show that he gets it just fine.

In as clear an example of a pope changing the Vatican?s public tone as one is ever likely to see, Benedict pointedly insisted that the real ?persecution? facing him personally, and Catholicism generally, comes not from external attacks but from the reality of sin within the church.

tThose comments were made to reporters aboard the papal plane en route from Rome to Lisbon for Benedict XVI?s May 11-14 trip to Portugal.

tBenedict?s approach Tuesday marked a dramatic break with a drumbeat of commentary from Vatican officials and senior church leaders around the world, who have been far more inclined to complain about precisely the ?outside attacks? Benedict seemed to minimize.

Recently, for example, Gian Maria Vian, editor of *L?Osservatore Romano*, the official Vatican newspaper, told reporters at Rome?s Foreign Press Club that he sees a ?media campaign? in attempting to smear the pope ? related in part to opposition to the Catholic church?s teaching on bioethics, Vian charged, and in part to resentment about the international influence of the Holy See.

At around the same time, Vatican Radio complained of a ?media campaign of anti-Catholic hatred.? Cardinal William Levada, the American who serves as prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, came out swinging against the *New York Times*, charging in March that its reporting on Benedict?s record has been ?deficient by any reasonable standards of fairness.?

tCapuchin Fr. Rainero Cantalamessa, the preacher of the papal household, delivered a now-infamous Good Friday sermon comparing criticism of Pope Benedict on the sex abuse crisis to anti-Semitism. (In fairness, Cantalamessa actually quoted a letter that he said came from a Jewish friend making the comparison.) Two days later, Cardinal Angelo Sodano opened the Easter Sunday Mass by comparing attacks on the pope to ?petty gossip.?

Among bishops outside Rome, a similar pattern has emerged. On Holy Thursday, Cardinal Angelo Scola of Venice referred to an ?iniquitous humiliation? of Benedict XVI in the media, fueled by ?deceitful allegations.? On Palm Sunday, Archbishop Timothy Dolan of New York asserted that the pope is ?now suffering some of the same unjust accusations, shouts of the mob, and scourging at the pillar, as did Jesus.? Archbishop Kazimierz Nycz of Warsaw likewise said the church must say ?no, in the name of truth and justice? to criticism of the pope.

tIn light of that background, Benedict?s words on the sexual abuse crisis aboard the papal plane today are especially striking.

tFirst, a footnote: Even the pope was speaking in a session with journalists, he was hardly caught off-guard. The Vatican asks reporters travelling with the pope to submit questions for the plane several days in advance, so Benedict has plenty of time to ponder what he wants to say. If he takes a question on the plane, it?s because he wants to talk about it, and he?s chosen his words carefully.

tThe question to the pope was framed in the context of his upcoming visit to Fatima. Back in 2000, then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger was on hand to deliver a theological commentary upon the famed ?Third Secret? of Fatima, which turned out to be a vision of a bishop in white fired upon with guns and arrows. The vision was widely taken as a reference to the 1981 assassination attempt against Pope John Paul II.

tThis morning, Benedict was asked if it?s possible to read other papal suffering in light of the vision, including the sex abuse crisis. In effect, the nature of the question almost invited Benedict to style himself as another pope subject to unjust persecution.

In reply, Benedict resisted the temptation to read his travails into the Fatima vision, saying instead that what it teaches is that the church will always suffer attacks of various sorts until the end of time.

tThen Benedict came to the money quote on the crisis, and it?s worth repeating what he said in full:

> *In terms of what we today can discover in this message, attacks against the pope or the church don?t come just from outside the church. The suffering of the church also comes from within the church, because sin exists in the church. This too has always been known, but today we see it in a really terrifying way. The greatest persecution of the church doesn?t come from enemies on the outside, but is born in sin within the church. The church thus has a deep need to re-learn penance, to accept purification, to learn on one hand forgiveness but also the necessity of justice. Forgiveness does not exclude justice. We have to re-learn the essentials: conversion, prayer, penance, and the theological virtues.*

tThe immediate effect of that statement would seem to be the following: If a Vatican official, or a Catholic prelate elsewhere in the world, falls back on a finger-pointing strategy, he will inevitably face questions about how to square such rhetoric with the pope?s own example.

tIf confirmation of the point were needed, consider that when a major Italian newspaper recently reported that Benedict XVI had asked Sodano to come to his defense during the Easter Sunday Mass, Vatican spokesperson Fr. Federico Lombardi was quick to issue a barbed denial.

?The pope does not beg or organize demonstrations in his own defense or support,? Lombardi said.

Lombardi said that Sodano had acted on behalf of the cardinals in Rome, as the dean of the College of Cardinals, and that Benedict only learned shortly in advance that Sodano was planning to speak at all. Lombardi said the pope welcomed Sodano?s intent to express ?closeness, affection and solidarity? with the pope ? carefully refraining from adding any papal reaction to what Sodano actually said.

In light of Benedict?s words this morning, such gloss would arguably have been superfluous in any event. The pope seemed clear: The fault worth focusing on lies not in the church?s stars, but in itself.

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