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# Four questions about the pope's trip to the UK

John L. Allen Jr. | Sep. 3, 2010 All Things Catholic

Now that September has arrived, news agencies are beginning to focus in earnest on Pope Benedict XVI's Sept. 16-19 trip to the United Kingdom. I know that because of the phone calls and e-mails I've received from colleagues in Scotland and England in the last few days, seeking a sound-bite for whatever curtain-raising piece they have to do.

Press culture in the U.K. is extremely competitive, so when there's no actual news to report it has to be manufactured. Here's a recent case in point vis-à-vis the papal trip: Not long ago, local organizers put out a "pilgrim's guide" for people attending the big events. It included tips on stuff not to bring, such as booze, BBQs, and open flames. Also on the list were musical instruments, which prompted a reporter from the *Daily Telegraph* to call the bishops' conference to ask: "Does that include the vuvuzela?" (That, of course, is the god-awful horn made famous by the South African World Cup.) The person on the other end of the line said something on the order of, "Well, yes, I suppose it would."

The next-day headline, which predictably became a mini-sensation in "News of the Weird" columns all over the world: "Pope Bans Vuvuzela."

It was great fun, even if each of the three words in that header was misleading. (The pope didn't do anything; this was more of a suggestion than a ban; and nobody specifically nixed vuvuzelas. Though, to be honest, Benedict probably ought to be grateful -- this is one instance in which the media made up something that probably helped his reputation.)

In the spirit of feeding the media beast, I'll present my answers to the four most common questions I've received about the trip. By no means does this add up to a comprehensive analysis of the most important points. Instead, it's a window into the questions reporters are asking, which may preview themes likely to loom large in media coverage.

**1. Is this the most challenging trip of Benedict's papacy?**

My basic answer is, "Don't flatter yourselves." This will be Benedict's 17th foreign trip, and not only is this probably not the most strenuous test he's faced, it's arguably not even his most demanding visit in Western Europe.

In terms of immediate context, Benedict's 2006 trip to Turkey was far more dicey -- his first to a Muslim nation, hard on the heels of his Regensburg speech which triggered fierce protest around the Islamic world. The pope's 2009 trip to Israel and the Palestinian Territories was also a high-wire act, both on the diplomatic and inter-religious levels.

Within Europe, Benedict's July 2006 trip to Spain was at least as potentially choppy, featuring his first-ever showdown with Socialist Prime Minister José Luis Rodr'guez Zapatero -- seen by many European Catholics as an avatar of secularism on steroids. Spain's fierce anti-clerical rage is at least arguably more menacing for a

pope than gentle English ridicule. (Remember the line from "A Man for All Seasons" -- "This isn't Spain, you know. This is England.")

That said, there are challenges aplenty awaiting Benedict.

After all, he's a religious conservative colliding with a fairly liberal, secular culture; a German visiting a country that fought two wars against Germany in the 20th century; a pope travelling to a place where ambivalence about the papacy is part of the DNA; and the head of the Catholic church visiting a culture where the main Catholic storyline of late has been about pedophile priests. All in all, it's a tough room.

Let's count the ways: High-profile atheists want the pope arrested for alleged complicity in covering up sexual abuse scandals. A Foreign Office bureaucrat has suggested that Benedict visit an abortion clinic or launch his own brand of condoms. There's a growing chorus of complaint about why British taxpayers should pay $18.5 million for the trip. Reportedly, British Catholics have been reluctant to pick up their share of the tab, or even to get tickets for the big events, despite the lure of marquee performers such as Susan Boyle. Human rights lawyer Geoffrey Robinson is publishing a book called *The Case of the Pope*, arguing that Benedict should be stripped of his status as "the one man left in the world who is above the law."

There will be some intra-Catholic noise. Advocates of women priests have paid for ads on fifteen red buses in London reading "Pope Benedict -- Ordain Women Now!" Next week, a group called Catholic Voices for Reform is holding a press conference to present Benedict with questions on matters such as "corruption" and "mindless obedience." Outside the Catholic fold, a mix of secularists, gay rights activists, and others plan to march in London on Sept. 18 under the banner of "Protest the Pope!" A smaller group is organizing a separate demonstration against his visit to the Twickenham neighborhood the day before.

If the question is whether Benedict XVI has his work cut out for him, the answer is "sure." I've written before that a papal trip anyplace in Western Europe these days is the sociological equivalent of a Gay Pride rally, in that Catholics too now perceive themselves as a misunderstood minority obliged to practice a politics of identity. Recently Edmund Adamus, director of pastoral affairs in the diocese of Westminster, said that Britain has become more anti-Catholic than Saudi Arabia, China and Pakistan, because of its embrace of a "culture of death". Catholic composer James MacMillan, who has produced a new setting of the Mass to mark the papal visit, has called anti-Catholicism "the new anti-Semitism of the liberal intellectual." Whatever backlash awaits Benedict in the U.K. will only strengthen such perceptions.

If the question, however, is whether this trip presents a set of headaches the pope has never seen before, the answer is basically "Been there, done that."

As a footnote, the potential for blowback in Scotland is probably less significant. A recent national poll found only two percent of Scots are "strongly opposed" to the pope's visit, while 31 percent said they're "very or fairly favorable" and 63 percent are indifferent.

**2. Overall, what do you expect?**

Prediction is a hazardous business, but here's one I feel safe in making: Whatever the consensus public expectations are for the trip, Benedict will almost certainly exceed them. I have three reasons for saying so.

First, when Benedict hits the road, he benefits from the bar being set low. People know his papacy has been marred by a series of PR debacles, so anything that happens short of absolute disaster can be spun as a success. Further, most people have never seen the pope before, and what they've heard second-hand usually isn't good -- that he's cold, aloof, authoritarian, repressive, etc. Measured against that caricature, contact with the real man always seems a pleasant surprise. (Perhaps this is the genius behind the Vatican's apparent PR bungling: they've

created a scenario in which Benedict basically can't lose.)

Second, anti-papal protestors usually have a bigger voice in the media than their sociological footprint on the ground, so predictions of massive demonstrations almost never materialize. The few who turn out to jeer seem a footnote in comparison to the enthusiastic crowds greeting the pope, especially because the supporters will be in every camera frame, while the protestors won't get within a mile of the action. The vast majority of folk who are unenthusiastic about the pope's presence will simply ignore the trip, rather than mounting barricades.

Third, Benedict is not going to ride into town and give people excuses to get mad. This is not going to be Libyan strongman Muammar Gaddafi's recent 48-hour whirlwind visit to Rome, where he hired a bevy of female escorts to listen to him proclaim that Islam should be the religion of Europe, demanded that EU nations pay him $6.5 billion a year to stem the flow of illegal immigrants from Africa, blew off a meeting with Italian Bishop Domenico Mogavero, and then took off -- leaving behind a chorus of protests that the visit amounted to a "national humiliation."

That's just not the style of Benedict XVI, who is an unfailingly gracious and humble guest. The road is actually where Benedict's commitment to "affirmative orthodoxy," meaning the most positive spin possible on the traditional Christian message, becomes especially palpable. Each time people have gone into a papal trip expecting the Ali-Frazier prizefight -- the Cologne World Youth Day in '05, for example, or the meeting with Zapatero in '06 -- what they got instead was "I'd like to buy the world a Coke."

Benedict is likely to extol the riches of English history and culture, declaring the tensions opened by the English Reformation closed. He'll express gratitude for progress in Anglican/Catholic relations and reaffirm his commitment to Christian unity. He'll stress the desire of the church to be a positive force for the common good. He'll also try to offer a shot in the arm to the six million Catholics in the U.K., particularly by lifting up the example of Cardinal John Henry Newman, set for beatification in Birmingham on the last day of the papal trip.

All that will strike even dubious Scots or Brits as more friendly than they expected, and will probably produce a short-term boost in the pope's favorability ratings. (After his April 2008 trip to the United States, which was also a laboratory experiment in affirmative orthodoxy, two national polls found a ten-point bump in the percentage of Americans who approved of Benedict's job performance.)

In a recent piece for the English magazine *Standpoint*, American Catholic writer George Weigel predicted that "Those who expect to meet 'God's Rottweiler' will find instead a shy, soft-spoken man of exquisite manners ? Those looking for a hidebound clerical enforcer will meet instead a man of deep faith, a gentle pastor." Based on my experience of covering papal trips, that's about right.

For all those reasons, the trip may not be a home run, but it's unlikely to be a strikeout either. (Or, to use a cricket image, since this is the U.K., Benedict's not going to be a "walking wicket." I presume someone will tell me if I used that term correctly.)

**3. Will the sex abuse crisis overshadow the trip?**

Probably not. It didn't in the United States or Australia in 2008, both places where the sexual abuse crisis has been more intense. Things have been so comparatively calm in the U.K. that Bishop Kieran Conry of Arundel and Brighton recently suggested that Pope Benedict "may well be relieved to be coming to a place where, unlike some of his other recent trips, there are no big problems for him to sort out."

Here's the main reason, however, why the crisis won't overshadow the trip: A papal journey is one of those rare moments when the Vatican is adept at offering the media another story to do.

While the pope is in town, there will be plenty of compelling pictures and sound: Benedict XVI meeting the Queen, visiting the Archbishop of Canterbury at Lambeth Palace, standing in the spot in Westminster Hall where St. Thomas More was condemned, praying at the tomb of St. Edward the Confessor, and on and on. That's as opposed to the Vatican's usual modus operandi during a crisis, which is to hunker down and wait for the storm to pass, issuing only terse statements, while rogue officials offer unsolicited remarks which often make things worse.

In his *Standpoint* piece, Weigel complained that "seemingly endless stories of clerical sexual abuse, and the mismanagement of these sins and crimes by Catholic bishops, are not the only story to be told about the church at the end of the first decade of the 21st century." He's right, of course, but the PR reality is that the Vatican is often unable to provide an alternative narrative. A papal trip is the towering exception.

Three other variables may determine how big a deal the crisis seems while Benedict is on the ground.

First, some observers believe that media outlets are planning to reveal new abuse cases in the U.K. just ahead of Benedict's arrival, thus triggering a new cycle of the crisis, akin to what happened in Germany earlier this year. Writing in the *Guardian* on Monday, Paul Donovan opined that such revelations "would shoot to pieces the strategy that has attempted to separate the church in the U.K. from the rest of the world on child abuse, arguing it acted properly and put in place rigid guidelines."

Second, Cardinal Seán Brady of Ireland has announced plans to accompany the pope in Scotland and England. Brady has been under fire for his role in the massive sexual abuse crisis in Ireland, including charges that in the 1970s he participated in putting the victims of a notorious abuser under a gag order. If Brady is spotted at the pope's right hand, it could spark a new round of commentary about how Benedict "doesn't get it."

Third, the pope himself could put the crisis in the spotlight by holding a meeting with victims. While these encounters are always staged off-camera, at least some of the victims usually speak with the media afterwards, and in any event they make news. Archbishop Vincent Nichols of Westminster recently said that "careful consideration" was being given to holding such a meeting in England. If it happens, it would be Benedict's fifth session with victims, after meetings during previous trips to the United States, Australia and Malta, and one in Rome with members of Canadian "first nations" abused in church-run institutions.

By now, these meetings draw mixed reviews. The pope gets credit for reaching out, and the victims who take part are often moved. Others, however, will object that it's empty PR. The Survivors' Network of those Abused by Priests, the main victims' group in the States, put out a preemptive press release ahead of the U.K. trip asserting that such meetings "change nothing and protect no one," and believing they do is "a sad and silly and reckless assumption."

**4. What's Benedict's agenda for the trip?**

In the sense in which that question is usually intended, the answer is: "None." This isn't a typical state visit, in which Benedict is hoping to persuade the English Parliament to adopt this law or block that one, or aiming to wrest some commercial or foreign policy concession from the Cameron government. There is no short-term check-list, which means that there will be no way to assess on Sept. 20 whether or not the trip was a success.

That's not to say, of course, that Benedict is traveling to Scotland and England just for the hell of it.

The pope legendarily thinks in centuries, and so his "agenda" in the U.K., as elsewhere, is decidedly long-term. His vision of Christianity in the West today is as a "creative minority" (a term he borrows from British historian Arnold Toynbee). By "minority," Benedict means a church that's no longer a culture-shaping majority but rather

a subculture, which of course is no more than a concession to sociological reality. By "creative," he means a subculture clear about its own identity, and passionate about infusing that energy and vision into society.

Building a "creative minority" is thus a two-stage project:

- Fostering a strong sense of Catholic identity by emphasizing traditional markers of Catholic thought, speech and practice;
- Applying that identity to broader social, cultural and political debates, rather than retreating into a ghetto.

In broad strokes, Benedict's "agenda" is to advance the creative minority project in the United Kingdom.

What might that mean in practice? Perhaps Peter Sanford, a former editor of the *Catholic Herald*, had it about right in his piece in Sunday's *Guardian*: "Pope Benedict may want to stiffen the collective Catholic resolve." Sanford sketched the pragmatic, middle-of-the-road ethos of English Catholicism, often terribly concerned with being socially acceptable. He then quoted an English bishop to the effect that maybe he and his colleagues need to engage in "a little more searching and even brutal debate" with the broader culture.

That, Sanford opined, "will be music to the pope's ears.

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