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Pope on crisis: 'We weren't fast enough'

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

LONDON -- In the old days, the normal Vatican pattern was that the pope would say or do something controversial, and then his aides would try to calm the waters. It?s a measure of how out of sorts the Vatican?s communications enterprise has been that these days, things seem to work exactly the other way around.

The pattern of the pope cleaning up a mess created by other top church officials was first glimpsed in Portugal, after senior Vatican personnel had publicly compared criticism of the pope to anti-Semitism and ?petty gossip.? Benedict XVI changed the tone by insisting, in comments to reporters aboard the papal plane, that the real problem was not outside attacks but sin inside the church.

That papal course correction continued on day one of his four-day trip to the United Kingdom, which got off to an inauspicious start as British papers played up a comment by German Cardinal Walter Kasper, recently retired as the Vatican?s top ecumenical official, that landing at Heathrow Airport, one has the sense of arriving in a ?third world country.?

Kasper, who is not on the U.K. trip due to illness, also complained that an ?aggressive atheism? is speaking in Britain.

That might have been the dominant day one story, had it not been for Pope Benedict XVI?s comments aboard the papal plane on the sexual abuse crisis. The pontiff candidly acknowledged that the church was ?not sufficiently vigilant and not sufficiently quick and decisive to take the necessary measures? to combat the crisis.

Benedict said that the victims are the church?s top priority, and that abuser priests must never have access to children because they have a disease that ?good will? cannot cure.

Though the U.K. itself has not been hit especially hard by the sexual abuse scandals that have marred the church elsewhere, Benedict?s trip coincides with a mushrooming scandal in Belgium which began when a bishop was forced to resign after acknowledging abuse stretching over years against his own nephew. A church-sponsored commission recently delivered a report documenting a pattern of abuse affecting every diocese in the country.

Though the Vatican has yet to offer an official confirmation, Benedict is expected to meet victims while in the U.K. If so, it would be his fifth such encounter, with the first coming during an April 2008 trip to the United States.

The Survivors Network of Those Abused by Priests, the main victims' advocacy group in the United States, swiftly rejected Benedict's comments as dishonest.

"It?s disingenuous to say church officials have been slow and insufficiently vigilant in dealing with clergy sex crimes and cover ups," a ststement from the group said. "On the contrary, they?ve been prompt and vigilant, but in concealing, not preventing, these horrors."

In the first major event on his itinerary, Pope Benedict met Queen Elizabeth II this morning at Holyrood Palace in Edinburgh, Scotland, where he echoed Kasper?s complain about aggressive atheism in slightly more delicate fashion.

The pope called on the U.K. to defend ?those traditional values and cultural expressions that more aggressive forms of secularism no longer value or even tolerate.?

?Let it not obscure the Christian foundation that underpins its freedoms,? Benedict said.

In his comments to journalists, Benedict said that the U.K. has a long tradition of anti-Catholicism, but that it also has a ?great history of tolerance.?

Addressing the Queen, Benedict praised the humanitarian contributions of the U.K. throughout history, including its role in combating the slave trade and the legacy of Florence Nightingale in serving the sick.

?Even in our own lifetime, we can recall how Britain and her leaders stood against a Nazi tyranny that wished to eradicate God from society and denied our common humanity to many, especially the Jews, who were thought unfit to live,? the pope said.

Benedict also praised the Northern Ireland peace agreement, which has calmed centuries of tensions between Catholics and Protestants.

The pope also seemed to gently chide the British media, known around the world for hard-hitting, but also occasionally sensationalist, coverage of current events.

?Because their opinions reach such a wide audience, the British media have a graver responsibility than most and a greater opportunity to promote the peace of nations, the integral development of peoples and the spread of authentic human rights,? the pope said.

Benedict?s Sept. 16-19 visit to the United Kingdom is an official state visit, unlike John Paul?s 1982 journey which was billed as exclusively ?pastoral.? One clear sign of official welcome for the pontiff are the juxtaposed papal flags and Union Jacks which today line London?s Mall, the broad thoroughfare leading to Buckingham Palace.

After celebrating a Mass in Glasgow, Benedict arrives in London tonight. Tomorrow he?s scheduled to hold a session with leaders of Catholic education and then meet the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, in an effort to advance relations with the Anglican Communion. Those ties were strained earlier this year when Benedict XVI created new structures to welcome Anglican converts, a move some Anglican leaders described as ?poaching? and exacerbating instability inside Anglicanism.

Benedict will also deliver a widely anticipated address to English society in Westminster Hall. While there, he?ll stand in the spot where St. Thomas More was condemned to death five centuries ago.

Finally, Benedict will lead an ecumenical service tomorrow evening in Westminster Abbey.

[John L. Allen, Jr. is *NCR* senior correspondent.]

John Allen will be filing reports throughout the Papal visit to the U.K. Sept. 16-19. Stay tuned to NCR Today[1] for updates.

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All this week in his Distinctly Catholic blog, Michael Sean Winters is interviewing a variety of Newman scholars:

- Fr. Joseph Komonchak, taught ecclesiology at Catholic University, wrote his dissertation on Newman [21]
- Christopher Pramuk, Assistant professor of Theology at Xavier University in Cincinnati [22]
- Ian Ker, Professor at Oxford University and author of a Newman biography [23]
- The Very Reverend Richard Duffield, the Provost of the Birmingham Oratory [24]
- Archbishop Vincent Nichols, the Archbishop of Westminster and Primate of England [25]

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- Elena Curti, the deputy editor of the British Catholic weekly The Tablet [30]
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