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Only Benedict could go to China

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

In the political argot of our time, Pope Benedict XVI is unquestionably a "conservative." A core aim of his papacy is to revive a strong sense of traditional Catholic identity over against radical secularism, a classically conservative agenda.

Precisely because of those credentials, however, the old American axiom that "only Nixon could go to China" fits Benedict XVI like a glove. Because of who Benedict is and what he represents, every once in a while he can do things a more "liberal" pontiff either wouldn't dare or couldn't pull off without splitting the church apart.

That point has been brought home anew due to Benedict's new book-length interview with German journalist Peter Seewald, titled in English *Light of the World*, which featured some surprising comments on condoms.

Consider the following defining traits of cultural conservatives these days:

- A hawkish line on Islam
- Eco-skepticism
- Unyielding pro-life advocacy

Here's the irony, one which is often underappreciated: While Benedict XVI is obviously sympathetic with all three concerns, in some ways he's also taken the legs out from under the extremists in each camp.

Islam

On any list of improbable recent papal moments, the site of Benedict standing alongside a mufti in Istanbul's Blue Mosque in 2006, facing the *mihrab* in a moment of silent prayer, would have to figure near the top.

As a theologian, Benedict expressed doubts about the very possibility of inter-religious prayer. The fact that he stepped outside his own skin, so to speak, on such a high-profile occasion, offered a clear signal of his commitment to reconciliation with the Muslim world.

When Benedict was elected, many observers prophesied he would be the pope of Samuel Huntington's "Clash of Civilizations," rallying the Christian West against an Islamic threat. His Regensburg lecture in September 2006 seemed to cut in that direction, igniting protest across the Islamic world by appearing to link Muhammad with violence. (In his new book, Benedict admits he failed to realize that people would take his academic address as a political statement.)

Yet since Regensburg, Benedict instead has emerged as a great friend of Islam, albeit without pulling any punches on terrorism and religious freedom. He's met with Muslims on scores of occasions, opened up new dialogues, and pulled off highly successful trips to Muslim nations. Today, it's abundantly clear that détente with Islam is the top inter-faith priority of this papacy.

At the core of Benedict's vision is what he described during a May 2009 journey to Jordan as an "Alliance of Civilizations" ? a phrase obviously crafted as an alternative to the "Clash of Civilizations." The idea is that Christians and Muslims should stand shoulder-to-shoulder in defense of shared values such as the right to life, care of the poor, opposition to war and corruption, and a robust role for religion in public life. (The pope calls that "inter-cultural," as opposed to "inter-religious," dialogue.)

In *Light of the World*, Benedict is asked if he has abandoned the medieval notion that popes are supposed to save the West from Islamization.

"Today we are living in a completely different world, in which the battle lines are drawn differently," Benedict says. "In this world, radical secularism stands on one side, and the question of God, in its various forms, stands on the other."

In that struggle, Benedict sees Christians and Muslims as natural allies.

Bottom line: The only crusade Benedict is interested in leading is against a "dictatorship of relativism," not against Islam. If only Nixon could go to China, maybe only Benedict XVI can go to Mecca.

The Environment

The conservative wing of today's Catholic church includes some powerful eco-skeptics. Cardinal George Pell of Sydney, Australia, for example, has warned of "neo-paganism" and questioned the scientific data underlying global warming. Italian Catholic writers Antonio Gaspari and Riccardo Cascioli see today's greens as a warmed-over version of yesterday's reds ? radical Marxist materialists in a new guise.

Benedict XVI, however, is clearly not among them. His strong environmental advocacy has actually led him to be dubbed the "Green Pope."

Over the past five years, Benedict has openly warned of an "ecological crisis," accepted the reality of climate change, and called for lifestyle changes in the West to promote sustainable development. He's put his money where his mouth is, with solar panels installed atop the Vatican's audience hall as well as his private home in Regensburg. Recently, a Vatican official also said that Benedict would prefer to use an electric popemobile.

Benedict devoted his annual message for the World Day of Peace this year to the care of creation, arguing that resolving environmental threats such as the over-use of natural resources and climate change is essential to promoting peace.

To be sure, Benedict's shade of green is not that of "Earth First!" or the Sierra Club. He sees environmentalism as a step towards a broad revival of natural law, meaning that a moral code is written in creation. He too worries about pantheistic and neo-pagan currents in environmental thought, and he rejects the idea that ecology demands population control.

That said, Benedict XVI has moved concern for the environment from the avant-garde of Catholic life to the center. In *Light of the World*, Benedict argues that the church may be the "only hope" for the earth, because it can penetrate beyond systems and policies into the individual conscience, where choices have to be made to change the way people live.

In a sound-bite, Benedict has made it impossible to justify eco-skepticism by wrapping oneself in the papal flag.

Condoms and AIDS

For the record, Benedict's recent comments on condoms do not amount to a reversal of church teaching on human sexuality. The official Catholic view remains that to be fully moral, sex must occur within the context of heterosexual marriage and must be open to new life.

The way Benedict approaches the question in *Light of the World* actually seems to have less to do with moral theology than spiritual maturation, suggesting that concern for someone else's life and health, even if expressed by the dubious choice to put on a condom, could represent the first stirrings of a sense of responsibility.

Yet if only indirectly, that analysis does appear to revive a strain in Catholic moral reflection codified by St. Alphonsus Liguori in the 18th century, which built on long-standing practice among confessors, known as "counseling the lesser evil." In a nutshell, it holds that if someone is engaging in behavior the church regards as sinful, and they can't be persuaded to stop, it's permissible to advise them to at least minimize the harm.

The strongest pro-life forces in the Catholic church have resisted any movement to say that officially, in part on the theological basis that it could undercut the notion of certain acts as "intrinsically evil," but also for pastoral reasons. They worry that any concession on condoms, however carefully nuanced, will come across as a weakening of the church's resolve, a first step along a slippery slope toward blanket approval for birth control.

Benedict XVI has not adopted that view ? on the conviction, perhaps, that the occasional irrationality of the wider world is no reason to truncate the rationality of Catholic thought.

In so doing, the pope has also given a bit of reassurance to Catholic pastors, health care workers and anti-AIDS activists, who sometimes quietly tolerate condom use in morally flawed situations, and who have always been forced to look over their shoulder.

Read NCR's editorial: **Pope's condom remarks: a step into the real world** [1]

A thought experiment

As a thought experiment, you might ponder whether any of the more "progressive" figures mentioned as possible popes in the last conclave ? for example, Cardinals Carlo Maria Martini of Milan, Godfried Danneels of Belgium or Oscar Rodriguez Maradiaga of Honduras ? would have been able to move the goalposts on these three fronts as Benedict XVI has done, at least without provoking far more serious backlash than we've seen.

It's an impossible question to answer, really, but the mere fact that it's worth thinking about says something.

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As a footnote, there's a sense in which claiming that "only Benedict could go to China" is not just metaphorical. Benedict's China policy, expressed in a 2007 letter to Chinese Catholics, is to encourage "normalization," meaning overcoming the de facto schism between an underground church and a church recognized by the government. That too has frustrated some Catholic hawks, who support a more confrontational stance vis-à-vis China's Communist authorities.

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Debate over Benedict XVI's role in the sexual abuse crisis flared up anew this week, with both the pope's critics and his supporters following the paper trail.

In Germany, *Der Spiegel* reported on newly unearthed documents [2] in the case of Fr. Peter Hullermann, a priest facing allegations of abuse who came into the Munich archdiocese while then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger was in charge, ended up in a parish, and went to abuse others. The Vatican, meanwhile, has produced a "smoking gun" of its own ? a freshly discovered piece of correspondence showing that as early as 1988, Ratzinger pushed Rome to adopt "swifter and more simplified procedures" to punish abuser priests.

My story on the Vatican's latest effort to defend the pope's record can be found here: Vatican offers 'smoking gun' to defend pope's record on sex abuse [3]

If nothing else, the coincidence of these two stories breaking at the same moment ? as it happened, on the same day ? suggests that dissection of Benedict's record on the crisis is likely to go on for some time to come.

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