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Benedict touts Christian humanism, defends wartime prelate in Croatia

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tEven before he landed in Croatia on Saturday for a brief weekend excursion, Pope Benedict XVI made the trip?s basic pitch clear. Speaking to reporters on the papal plane, Benedict used some version of the phrase ?Christian humanism? six times ? the idea being that Christian moral and spiritual values are the ultimate basis for peace, tolerance, and human rights.

tAs Croatia prepares to enter the European Union, the pope?s core argument was thus that this deeply Catholic nation doesn?t have to choose between the humanistic ideals of secular Europe and its religious heritage. The latter, he suggested multiple times, is actually the guarantee of the former.

tIn selling that message, however, Benedict XVI faced two clear challenges, and although he tackled both head-on, it?s not immediately obvious that either was resolved.

tFirst, the official motive for the pope?s trip was to celebrate the first ?National Day of Croatian Families,? a church-sponsored effort to promote traditional family values. Yet even in Croatia, where 90 percent of the population of 4.4 million is Catholic, same-sex couples have been recognized since 2003 and a permissive abortion law dating from the Communist era remains in force.

tSecond, Benedict XVI defended the memory of Croatia?s most famous modern Catholic, Cardinal Aloysius Stepinac. Five decades after his death in 1960, Stepinac remains a lightning rod ? celebrated as a martyr and hero by many for his resistance to Communism, reviled as a war criminal and Nazi collaborator by others for his relationship with Croatia?s Usta?e regime during World War II.

tThe trip to Croatia was the 19th foreign journey of Benedict?s papacy, and his first visit to the Balkans region. The highlight was an open-air Mass on Sunday that drew an estimated 300,000 people to a hippodrome in Zagreb, the Croatian capital. It was the same space used by John Paul II in 1994, while the Balkan wars were raging just 25 miles away.

tBenedict?s most developed presentation of Christian humanism came in a speech on Saturday to a group of political, intellectual and religious leaders gathered in Croatia?s National Theater.

t?Christ is fully human, and whatever is human finds in him and in his word the fullness of life and meaning,? he said.

tBenedict argued that Christian teaching illustrates the real meaning of the concept of ?conscience,? defending it against ideological manipulation to the benefit of the strong over the weak.

?If, in keeping with the prevailing modern idea, conscience is reduced to the subjective field to which religion

and morality have been banished, then the crisis of the West has no remedy and Europe is destined to collapse in on itself,? the pontiff said.

?If, on the other hand, conscience is rediscovered as the place in which to listen to truth and good, the place of responsibility before God and before fellow human beings ? in other words, the bulwark against all forms of tyranny ? then there is hope for the future.?

The pope also argued that the concept of life as ?gift,? embedded in Christianity, is an antidote to treating people as commodities.

?Once it has been assimilated it can be applied to the most complex areas of political and economic life so as to build up a polis that is welcoming and hospitable, but at the same time not empty, not falsely neutral, but rich in humanity, with a strongly ethical dimension,? he said.

tThough the pontiff?s tone over the weekend was largely positive, he didn?t shy away from condemning what he described as ?difficulties and threats? facing the family in a secular age.

tBenedict called upon Croats to ?affirm the inviolability of human life from conception until natural death, the singular and irreplaceable value of the family founded upon matrimony and the need for legislation which supports families in the task of giving birth to children and educating them.?

t?Do not give in to that secularized mentality which proposes living together as a preparation, or even a substitute for marriage!? the pope said.

tBenedict linked that pro-marriage appeal to his broad theme of Christian humanism.

t?Openness to life is a sign of openness to the future, confidence in the future, just as respect for the natural moral law frees people, rather than demeaning them,? he said.

tOn Stepinac, Benedict hailed the late cardinal as a model of ?true humanism? for his resistance to two dictatorships: First, the Usta?e, who proclaimed an independence that Benedict described as a ?lie,? because it was ?manipulated by Hitler for his own ends?; and second, the Yugoslav Communists under Marshall Josip Tito.

t Critics charge that Stepinac was pro-Usta?e, tolerating the forced conversion of Orthodox Serbs and persecution of Jews. He was convicted of war crimes by Yugoslav authorities in 1946, in a proceeding denounced in the West at the time as a template for bogus Communist ?show trials.?

Beatified by John Paul II in 1998, Stepinac remains a sticking point in Catholic/Jewish relations and in wider debates over the church's record on human rights.

tThe American Gathering of Holocaust Survivors and their Descendants issued a statement over the weekend objecting to Benedict?s visit to Stepinac?s tomb, describing the Croat cardinal as an ?avid supporter? of the Usta?e, ?whose cruelties were so extreme that they even shocked some of their Nazi masters.?

tYet in a speech to bishops, priests, religious and seminarians on Sunday, Benedict insisted that Stepinac was actually ?a defender of the Jews, the Orthodox, and all the persecuted.? The pontiff hailed Stepinac as a role model ?not just for Croats, but for all of us.?

tThe pontiff said that Stepinac?s heroism inspired Croatian Catholics to remain united under the Communists, thereby ?explaining what is humanly inexplicable: that such a hardened regime could not make the church bow down.?

tBenedict also hailed Stepinac as an apostle of Catholic identity, warmly quoting from a 1943 address by the Croatian prelate: ?One of the greatest evils of our time is mediocrity in the questions of faith. Let us not deceive ourselves? Either we are Catholic or we are not. If we are, this must be seen in every area of our life.?

tAs is often the case with papal travel, Benedict?s visit to Croatia drew largely positive local media coverage and enthusiastic crowds, despite vows of protest beforehand from some human rights groups about the Catholic church?s alleged ?intolerance? and grumbling about the cost (estimated at roughly U.S. $3 million).

tFor Croats themselves, perhaps the biggest news flash was Benedict?s strong support for the country?s EU membership, despite growing public complaints about a lengthy process of negotiations. The pontiff called Croatia?s entry, expected sometime next year or in 2013, ?logical, just and necessary.?

tThe Croatia trip was Benedict?s first foreign outing of 2011. In August, Benedict will travel to Madrid, Spain, for World Youth Day, while in September the German pontiff will make a state visit to Berlin, and in November he?ll travel to Benin, marking his second journey to Africa.

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