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What the Pope Could Have Done to Feel More Welcome

Ken Briggs | Aug. 23, 2011 NCR Today

Not long ago, Spanish Catholics were among the staunchest opponents of much of what Vatican II proposed to renew the church.

Last week the Spanish people, most of them probably still Catholic in some sense, took to the streets to protest the cost of Pope Benedict's visit to the World Youth Day festivities -- an estimated $72 million.

Not long ago, the public would have no doubt given silent support to a papal visit regardless of cost. Catholicism was the state religion, a partner in governing with Gen. Franco, a guarantor of the old order under-girded by unquestionable certainties. It had given birth to Opus Dei and rejected freedom of religious conscience.

Today, under democratic rule and economic disaster, a sizable portion of the Spanish public denounced the cost of the pope's visit as scandalous in the face of more pressing social needs. Spain has an overall unemployment rate of 21 percent; 46 percent of young people are without jobs.

It's ironic, of course, that the church's youth festival should be activated in this climate of youth misfortune. Most protesters seemed to agree that there was something terribly wrong with this picture.

Backers of the pope's visit argue that the week-long event will bring in more than $200 million in tourist money. Where those revenues end up is another question entirely. Profits don't trickle down or generally contribute to lasting economic progress.

The hostility sparked by the visit has cast a shadow over the entire event. A quarter century from now, the marchers in the streets are likely to be remembered more than the orderly crowd of Youth Day attendees, for better or worse. The point is that the Vatican harmed itself by insisting on going ahead with an event that contradicted its own social justice teaching.

They could have avoided it altogether by taking a page from those teachings. Imagine if the Pope had offered to cover the Spanish government's trip expenses and set up a fund specifically to help relieve the poor and unemployed. Even giving a healthy fraction of those expenses would have been in keeping with the church's own call for sacrifice and compassion.

Such a move, done sincerely and with conviction, could have turned a disaster into a sign of hope, that the church meant what it said and heard the appeals of the needy.

During his papacy, Benedict has been in tension with the Spanish government and decried what he sees as its secularism. Spain allows gay marriage, has relaxed abortion regulations and discontinued required religious education in public schools. To the pope, this is breaking faith with its Catholic heritage.

But reaching out to help those who disagree would be even more meaningful and noteworthy. There is nothing

to indicate that the pope was less willing to respond to the protesters because they were dissenters. But whatever the reason, Benedict and his advisers made a regrettable decision with negative consequences that could last a long time.

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