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Three things we learned from Benedict's Germany trip

John L. Allen Jr. | Sep. 30, 2011 All Things Catholic

Last Sunday Pope Benedict XVI wrapped up a four-day trip to Germany, which, depending upon whose word you take, either generated ?widespread acclaim? (Italian commentator Sandro Magister) or a national yawn (the Munich daily *Sueddeutsche Zeitung*?s headline was, ?He came, he spoke, he disappointed.?)

This was the German pope?s third homecoming, though his first state visit, and the 21st foreign trip of his papacy.

At one level, it?s tempting to say things were pretty much par for the course. As usual, expectations of massive protest didn?t pan out; while a few thousand demonstrators took to the streets in Berlin (brandishing ?Donate a condom for the pope!? signs), most of Benedict?s opponents simply tuned him out, while the pope drew 320,000 over four days. Also as usual, intrepid Italian reporters created news when the pope didn?t supply it. Over-hyped accounts of an air gun being fired before a papal Mass in Erfurt got the juices flowing on Saturday, while Sunday was devoted to first floating, then debunking, a rumor that the pope would resign at 85.

There were precious few surprises, though we did get a reminder that Benedict has a sense of humor. During a speech to the federal parliament, the pope referenced a German intellectual who changed his mind on something while in his eighties, and added: ?I find it comforting that rational thought is evidently still possible at the age of 84!?

Despite the generally familiar flavor of the trip, there were a few nuggets along the way with something to say about Benedict?s papacy and the direction of the church on his watch. Herewith, then, three things we learned from the pope?s trip to Germany.

1) A sensation as cultural critic

Pop quiz: What do the Collège des Bernardins in Paris, Westminster Hall in London, and now the Reichstag building in Berlin have in common? The answer, in papal terms, is that they have been the settings for arguably the most triumphant moments of Benedict?s papacy -- occasions when the cerebral pontiff dazzled secular audiences with an oratorical tour de force on faith, reason, and the foundations of democratic society.

Whatever one makes of Benedict as a religious leader, he?s a sensation as a cultural critic. True to form, his Sept. 22 speech to the Bundestag, the national parliament, quickly became the latest candidate for ?best speech of his papacy.?

Addressing German lawmakers, but really speaking to Western culture generally, Benedict took on logical positivism -- the view that only empirical science counts as real knowledge, and that all moral claims are subjective. It?s a widespread conviction, the pope said, but inadequate as the basis of a just society. Without belief in some form of natural law, he argued, there?s no foundation for universal human rights. That means ?humanity is threatened?, because the only thing left as the basis for law and politics is the raw will to power.

Germany?s Nazi past, Benedict XVI said, offers a harrowing reminder of what happens when ?power becomes divorced from right.?

The role of religious groups in a democracy, the pope suggested, is not to ?propose a revealed law to the state and to society,? but rather to hold up ?nature and reason? as reliable sources for making moral choices about the social order -- including, he stressed, respect for pluralism and diversity.

On this terrain, Benedict XVI can be surprising, and even lyrical. Before the Bundestag, the surprise came in his praise of the environmental movement, which, he said, represents ?a cry for fresh air,? a realization that nature does indeed contain a moral compass. (Ironically, several Greens were among 70 politicians who boycotted the speech). Benedict?s poetic streak, meanwhile, surfaced in likening positivism to a ?concrete bunker with no windows?, which shuts out the natural light of moral and spiritual truth.

Secular media outlets, even those which were otherwise critical, raved about the speech. *Der Spiegel* called it ?courageous? and ?brilliant,? while *Bild* quoted a prominent lawmaker hailing it as a ?masterpiece.? Even *Die Welt* grudgingly allowed that it was ?not completely without cunning.? (In a further indication that Benedict got through, the left-wing London *Guardian* published a lengthy commentary on the speech, encouraging secular environmentalists to see past their stereotypes of the pope as ?a prissy and repressed German professor?.)

In these venues, Benedict also wins points for style. He comes off as gracious and thoughtful, a contrast to the blowhards and ideologues who dominate public life. As George Weigel recently put it, he seems ?the world?s premier adult.?

All this suggests a note of encouragement for Catholic movers and shakers everywhere. Controversy swirls around the church these days, a point Benedict acknowledged elsewhere in Germany by saying that sometimes the scandals of the sexual abuse crisis have overshadowed the ?scandal? of the faith, meaning Christ?s death on the Cross, his resurrection, and eternal life. Yet despite that, when a Catholic leader has something incisive to say, and finds a way to say it that?s both timely and effective, it?s still possible to get people thinking.

2) The ecumenical future: Collaboration, but not communion

Benedict?s return to the Land of Luther was always destined to be scrutinized for its impact on ecumenical relations, especially with the Protestant churches of the Reformation. On that score, to put it politely, Benedict drew mixed reviews.

The pope clearly signaled his ecumenical commitment, presiding over a service with a Lutheran bishop in the Erfurt monastery were Martin Luther was ordained an Augustinian monk. The pontiff expressed admiration for Luther?s passionate quest to understand God?s mercy, and Archbishop Robert Zollitsch, president of the German bishops conference, even said that Benedict asked him to find a way for the Catholic church to participate in celebrations of the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation in 2017 -- by any standard, a remarkably irenic touch from a Roman Pontiff.

Yet Benedict didn?t offer any breakthroughs, or even signals of flexibility, on the contentious points in Catholic/Lutheran relations, such as inter-communion or mixed marriages. For those who believe such reforms are a prerequisite to progress, the performance therefore left much to be desired.

Pundit Klaus Krämer, for instance, wrote that Benedict still styles ?the Catholic church as the ?cruise ship,? while the Protestant church is, at best, a ?container ship? that should follow the Vatican?s course.? The *Frankfurter Rundschau* was even more acerbic, calling the trip an ?ecumenical disaster? and Benedict?s approach to Protestants ?spectacularly half-hearted, patronizing, and callous.?

In a speech to Protestant leaders in Erfurt, Benedict identified two priorities for ecumenical relations in the 21st century:

- The ?new geography of Christianity,? by which the pope seemed to mean the dramatic growth of Pentecostal and Evangelical Christianity around the world, especially in the southern hemisphere. He called it ?a form of Christianity with little institutional depth, little rationality and even less dogmatic content, and with little stability? -- implying that whatever their differences, Catholics and Lutherans still have more in common with one another than, say, the Brazilian Pentecostal ?Church of Christ?s Spit.?
- Secularism in the West, where ?God is increasingly being driven out of our society? and the history of revelation recounted in Scripture is ?locked into an ever more remote past.? Secularism puts all Christians in the same boat, the pope said, just as they once faced a common threat from the Nazis -- and just as the witness of the martyrs gave rise to the ecumenical movement of the 20th century, he said, today a common faith lived within the secular world is ?the most powerful ecumenical force that brings us together.?

What seemed clear from the Germany trip is that Benedict XVI regards collaboration in responding to these external challenges as the near-term future of the ecumenical movement -- and not, therefore, structural unity that might lead to inter-communion. The ecumenical agenda on his watch, in other words, is more *ad extra* than *ad intra*.

3) Common Ground on Reform?

Though Benedict probably didn?t need it, his trip offered reminders that it isn?t just Protestants with an axe to grind; plenty of German Catholics are disgruntled too. For instance, the country?s president, a divorced and civilly remarried Catholic named Christian Wulff, pointedly told the pope on Friday, ?Many ask themselves how mercifully the church treats people who have suffered break-ups in their lives,? and advised the church ?to remain close to the people and not turn inward on itself.?

In Freiburg, tens of thousands of young Catholics held an overnight vigil on Saturday, awaiting the pontiff?s final Mass. As part of the warm-up act, organizers at one point passed out green and red inflatable sticks and asked the young people to use them to respond to an informal poll, holding up green for ?yes? and red for ?no.?

In response to the statement ?I model my life after standards set in Rome,? a vast wave of red rolled through the crowd. For ?Confession doesn?t play much of a role in my life,? however, as well as ?Women carry too little responsibility in the church,? the dominant color was green. Red mounted a strong comeback when the question switched to, ?Is the practice of homosexuality a sin??

Against that backdrop, Benedict?s Sept. 25 address in the Freiburg Concert House, speaking before what was described as a cross-section of Catholics ?involved in the church and in society,? was fairly unique in the annals of papal rhetoric.

For one thing, the pope didn?t mince words about the social realities: ?For some decades now, we have been experiencing a decline in religious practice and we have been seeing substantial numbers of the baptized drifting away from church life,? he said. He then posed precisely the question most reformers ask: ?Must the church not adapt her offices and structures to the present day, in order to reach the doubting and searching people of today??

In response, Benedict XVI said that tinkering with ecclesial structures is not the answer.

Real reform, he implied, is interior and spiritual, not external and structural. He cited Mother Theresa, who was

once asked what the first thing to change in the church would be. Her famous reply was, ?You and me.?

That?s a familiar note, and could seem to suggest an unbridgeable gulf between two models of reform: structural and spiritual. (Benedict himself hinted at the divide, suggesting that a sincere agnostic is preferable to a lukewarm believer who sees the church in merely institutional terms.)

Despite that apparent impasse, there was a twist to Benedict?s vision of renewal, one which hints at a possible intersection between spiritual and structural reform: His enthusiasm for reducing the power and privilege of the church.

In the address in the Freiburg Concert House, Benedict called upon the church to embrace ?worldly poverty,? so that her ?missionary witness shines more brightly.? He even went so far as to suggest that historically, secularization has been an agent of reform, because it has liberated the church from ?material and political burdens and privileges.?

As Sandro Magister noted, ?Never before had [Benedict] given such prominence to the ideal of a church poor in structures, in possessions, in power.?

The Germany trip, in other words, may have uncovered a surprising zone of common ground between the pope and reform forces -- the press for a humbler church, one which speaks to the world more out of poverty than power. That, at least, seems a place where conversation is possible.

[John L. Allen Jr. is *NCR* senior correspondent. His e-mail address is jallen@ncronline.org.]

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