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The pope in Mexico and Cuba

by John L. Allen Jr.

All Things Catholic

Pope Benedict XVI arrives today in León, Mexico, to kick off the 23rd foreign trip of his papacy but his first to Spanish-speaking Latin America. (He visited Brazil in 2007.) Benedict will spend the weekend in Mexico, then move Monday to Cuba before returning to Rome late Wednesday.

At one level, this is a tale of two different trips.

The pope's swing in Mexico will likely amount to a celebration of popular Catholicism, with about 3 million exuberant faithful expected to turn out. It also comes just ahead of national elections in July, raising fears of manipulation of the trip for political ends, especially given perceptions that the Mexican church is aligned in favor of the conservative National Action Party. However, Mexican Cardinal Javier Lozano Barragán, a retired Vatican official who will accompany the pope, recently insisted that trying to see the trip through the prism of electoral politics "would be like forcing the ocean into an oyster."

In Cuba, meanwhile, the pope comes to bring aid and comfort to a church that has long been suffocated by a hostile regime, shrunk by decades of state-imposed atheism to just 10 percent of the population, as measured by regular Mass attendance. Yet Cuban Catholicism still possesses impressive resilience, and is widely seen as the lone social institution able to extract concessions on human rights from the Castro government.

Officially, Benedict is visiting Mexico to commemorate the 20th anniversary of full diplomatic relations with the Holy See, while the occasion in Cuba is the 400th anniversary of the El Cobre sanctuary of Our Lady of Charity, Cuba's Catholic patroness. Wags have long joked that under Castro, the real patron saint is actually Che Guevara, but devotion to the Virgin of Charity is undergoing a renaissance as the state's grip on the church has loosened.

As has happened to Benedict on many of his other foreign trips, he may benefit from low expectations.

Set-up pieces have depicted Benedict as a Eurocentric intellectual who lacks any real popular flair, asserting that he doesn't command the same affection from Latin Americans as his charismatic predecessor, John Paul II. A vial of John Paul's blood, one of the relics from his beatification process, recently made its way up and down Mexico for 91 days, seen by an estimated 27 million devotees -- a sign, perhaps, that John Paul's memory still elicits more grassroots fervor than Benedict's present.

Archbishop Jose Guadalupe Martin Rabago of León actually felt compelled to chide people for such comparisons, saying this week, "All popes are equal and deserve our respect and adherence, regardless of whatever their personal charism might be."

In Mexico, Benedict also faces the shadow of the scandals associated with the late Fr. Marcial Maciel Degollado, founder of the Legionaries of Christ, who has become a global symbol of the clerical sexual abuse crisis. Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi said this week Benedict will not meet with victims of Maciel in Mexico, because such an encounter had not been requested by the local bishops. On Saturday in León, one of Maciel's victims is scheduled present a new book critical of the church's response to the Maciel case, titled "The Will Not to Know."

Given that context, even a modest show of popular enthusiasm for Benedict XVI, as well as anything he says or does that's at all relevant or engaging, may be enough to label the trip a success.

The trip seems likely to draw strong media interest, barring an "x factor," such as what happened the last time a pope visited Cuba. John Paul's January 1998 trip was set to be the world's dominant headline that week, symbolizing what *Newsweek* declared a "battle for Cuba's soul," until all the American media talent bugged out for Washington to cover an even juicier story -- the outbreak of the Monica Lewinsky scandal.

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Although it's not been officially confirmed, it's widely expected that while he's in Havana, Benedict will meet Fidel Castro. Rumors have suggested that the aging father of the revolution might announce his reconciliation with the Catholic church, speculation given legs by an interview with his daughter in an Italian newspaper claiming Castro has "come closer to religion and to God."

In the absence of a dramatic "trophy conversion" by the world's most prominent remaining communist, the following four storylines are likely to be where the action lies on the pope's Latin American swing.

Catholic attrition

Although Latin America is home to more than 40 percent of the world's 1.2 billion Catholics, not all is well for the church. In some parts of Latin America, secularism is eating away at both Catholic populations and a Catholic cultural ethos. Even more serious to Catholic fortunes has been the deep losses sustained in recent decades to various forms of mostly nondenominational Pentecostal and evangelical Christianity.

Belgian Passionist Fr. Franz Damen, a veteran staffer for the Bolivian bishops, concluded in the 1990s that conversions from Catholicism to Protestantism in Latin America during the 20th century surpassed the Protestant Reformation in Europe in the 16th century. A study commissioned in the late 1990s by CELAM, the Conference of Bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean, found that 8,000 Latin

Americans were deserting the Catholic church every day.

Facing those setbacks, the Latin American bishops who met with Benedict in 2007 called for a "Great Continental Mission" driven by old-fashioned, door-to-door pastoral outreach rather than sitting around in parishes and waiting for people to show up. As the bishops conceived it, this mission would be driven mostly by lay evangelists and would be directed especially at the *favelas* and *barrios* of the continent's mega-cities.

In other words, Latin America offers a good test case for Benedict's much-ballyhooed "New Evangelization," directed primarily at erstwhile Catholics who are lapsed or alienated from the faith.

Benedict's visit offers the opportunity for a check-up to see whether the "Great Mission" has actually gotten off the ground, especially on Sunday, when he celebrates a vespers service with the bishops of Mexico and Latin America. So far, it seems a work in progress; the most recent numbers released by the Vatican show the Latin American share of the global Catholic population registering a decline.

On the other hand, the pope can also celebrate some signs of new life.

In his 2008 book *Conversion of a Continent*, Dominican Fr. Edward Cleary argued that Latin America is in the grip of a religious upheaval, with Pentecostalism as its leading edge. Catholicism, Cleary says, is also becoming more dynamic in Latin America, generating higher levels of commitment among those who remain. Cleary believes that this Catholic awakening had its roots in lay movements that go back to the 1930s and '40s, but it's been jump-started by healthy competition from the Pentecostals.

In Cuba, Benedict may argue that the Cuban church has a special vocation in the "new evangelization" of Latin America. Just as John Paul insisted that the churches of Eastern Europe, battle-hardened by their fight with communism, could supply a shot in the arm to the churches of the secular West, Benedict may make a similar pitch to the Cubans about their role in Latin America today.

Faith and politics

Three big-ticket social and political concerns are likely to surface during the pope's time in Mexico. First up is the church's defense of human life and the family, with special focus on the hot-button issues of gay marriage and abortion.

Although Mexico City legalized first trimester abortion in 2007, the backlash against that move was strong enough that 19 of Mexico's 31 states actually tightened their laws. In some cases, women who have had abortions have been jailed, including 160 women in Guanajuato state, where León is located.

Second, Benedict will likely try to strike the Vatican's usual balance on immigration, between the right of a nation to regulate its borders but also the importance of compassionate policies and recognition of the benefits immigrants bring to host countries.

Mexico is both a source of new immigrants to the United States and a destination for migrants moving up from other parts of Latin America -- some in transit to Europe or North America, but others who stick around. Recently, Auxiliary Bishop Enrique Sanchez Martinez of Durango, Mexico, pointedly insisted that Mexicans must show the same toleration for immigrants crossing their own southern border that they demand from the United States, and Benedict may well echo that point.

Third, Benedict will have something to say about the drug trade, especially the violence and corruption associated with Mexico's notorious cartels. Recently one such outfit, which goes by the name of the

Knights Templar, announced a truce while the pope's in town, but that hardly cancels out the estimated 50,000 lives lost in Mexico from drug-related violence since the government launched a crackdown in 2006.

One of the most harrowing new Catholic martyrologies of 2011 came out of Mexico, a product of this wave of violence. A leader in the Scalabrian Lay Movement and a blogger named Mary Elizabeth Mac'as Castro was beheaded for exposing the activities of a drug cartel; according to the U.S.-based Committee to Protect Journalists, she was the first journalist in the world killed for use of social media.

Many Mexicans lay at least part of the blame for the violence at the feet of the voracious appetite for narcotics in the United States, raising the possibility that Benedict may address not just the cartels but also the northern consumers who bankroll their activities. At the same time, some critics charge Catholic leaders in Mexico with not doing enough to confront the drug violence. While priests and laypeople have been threatened, kidnapped and killed, some local pastors actually take money from the drug barons to build chapels or for other charitable purposes.

In Cuba, meanwhile, the primary church/state issue on the pope's docket will be the relationship with the regime.

Benedict will doubtless applaud a gradual détente that seems to have accelerated in recent years. In 2010, for instance, Raul Castro attended the inauguration of a new Catholic seminary around the same time that Cardinal Jaime Ortega had helped negotiate the largest prisoner release in a decade. Recently, Ortega was given a rare chance on national television to talk about the importance of the pope's visit.

That's not to say, however, that everything is peaches and cream. Recently, about 70 members of the staunchly Catholic Damas de Blanco dissident group, or "Ladies in White," were arrested and released after being warned not to cause disruptions during the papal visit.

Indeed, some voices among Cuban dissidents have opposed the very idea of a papal trip on the grounds that it serves to legitimize the regime and its purported reforms. Recently, Lech Walesa, founder of the Polish solidarity movement, publicly called on Benedict to meet leaders of Cuba's democratic opposition and not just the Castro brothers. There's long been frustration among dissident leaders who accuse the Cuban church of being overly passive and "soft," contrasting it with the strong opposition role played by Catholicism in Poland and elsewhere behind the former Iron Curtain.

On that score, Benedict is likely to encourage progressive normalization along the lines of post-Franco Spain, trying both to acknowledge the greater breathing space the church now enjoys without suggesting that reform is effectively over. Vatican sources suggest the pope may meet with a group of dissidents outside his formal program.

The Vatican has long been on record opposing the U.S. embargo on Cuba, and though Benedict is unlikely to engage in any direct finger-pointing on the issue, he will likely repeat standard rhetoric to the effect that engagement, not isolation, is the best approach.

Papal health watch

Benedict XVI will turn 85 next month, and the trip to Mexico and Cuba is his most significant road test ahead of that milestone. How well he seems to hold up will be subject to intense scrutiny, since it's really the only way outsiders have of measuring his health and stamina.

Already, Benedict's itinerary reflects concessions to his age. He's visiting León rather than Mexico City,

in part because the capital city's high altitude was considered inadvisable. Even though he arrives Friday afternoon, he doesn't have any formal activity scheduled until he meets President Felipe Calderón at 6 p.m. Saturday -- to afford the pontiff time, organizers say, to get over jet lag.

Indeed, Benedict is only scheduled to speak in public 10 times over the course of these six days, an average of less than two speeches a day. By way of contrast, when John Paul II made his first visit to Mexico in 1979 (along with the Dominican Republic and the Bahamas), he delivered 39 speeches over seven days, an average of five and a half per day.

American bishops who have recently met Benedict XVI as part of their *ad limina* visits to Rome generally report that they found the pontiff visibly aged and fatigued, though still sharp mentally.

While there's no sign of any imminent health crisis around Benedict XVI, pope-watchers will be paying careful attention to his limited public appearances in Mexico and Cuba, as they will when he gets back to Rome to lead the demanding stretch of liturgies and other public events from Palm Sunday through Easter, April 1 through April 8.

Possible popes

Given the dramatic population shift in global Catholicism from north to south, many analysts believe it's only a question of time until the church is led by a "Third World pope," and usually Latin America is where they start looking for candidates.

The smart money, however, says that the two most visible Catholic prelates Benedict will encounter on this Latin swing -- Cardinals Norberto Rivera Carrera of Mexico City and Ortega of Havana -- probably aren't serious contenders.

Rivera is still just 69, though he's been around a long time, named archbishop of Mexico City in 1995, at the tender age of 53, and made a cardinal by John Paul II in 1998. He drew some buzz last time around as a possible papal candidate, but in the end didn't have any traction in the conclave of April 2005 that elected Benedict XVI. This time around, Rivera is even less likely to take off given his long-standing public support for Maciel.

Even the most PR-challenged cardinal would likely shrink from the prospect of day-one headlines after next conclave reading, "New pope implicated in church sex scandals."

As for Ortega, he's already near the upper age limit of electability at 75. Although Ortega is widely admired in Catholic circles for his moral courage, the situation in Cuba is so deeply unique that many observers wonder how well he'd be positioned to respond to the radically different challenges facing Catholicism in other parts of the world.

If there is a possible future pope lurking in the background this week, it may be another Mexican: Cardinal José Francisco Robles Ortega of Guadalajara.

Just 63, Robles has a lot going for him as a potential *papabile*, or papal candidate. He lived at Rome's Pontifical Mexican College from 1976 to 1979 while studying at the Jesuit-run Gregorian University, and he was part of the Mexican delegation to the 1997 Synod for America, all of which gives Robles some Roman seasoning. That's especially important in a conclave in which capacity to take control of the Vatican machinery is likely to be an important voting issue. (Robles also has a great calling card in Italian popular Catholicism, which is a strong personal devotion to Padre Pio.)

Robles is widely considered less conservative, both theologically and politically, than River or the man he replaced in Guadalajara, Cardinal Juan Sandoval. He comes from a working class family in Jalisco state, and though he's never been part of the liberation theology movement, he reportedly has good relationships with the more progressive sectors of the Mexican church.

Yet Robles also enjoys strong papal support. Benedict made him a cardinal in 2007, while Robles was still in Monterrey, and then transferred him to Guadalajara in 2011 even though Sandoval was still 78, thus creating the anomaly of two cardinal-electors in the same diocese, something Benedict has clearly signaled he prefers to avoid. Robles is also the lone Spanish-speaking Latin American named by Benedict as a member of the Pontifical Council for Promoting the New Evangelization, a project that is the apple of the pope's eye and thus a clear sign of papal esteem.

As a result, Robles could have appeal to both the moderates and the conservatives within the College of Cardinals.

Both spiritually and politically, Robles is seen as a figure who's close to the poor and who advocates a spirit of humility among people in positions of power.

"Humility is a virtue that God rewards," Robles said in a 2007 homily, around the time he was named to the College of Cardinals. "How dangerous is haughtiness for whoever has power, whatever kind of power, political or economic."

Robles entered the College of Cardinals along with two other Latin Americans who are themselves often touted as papal candidates -- Cardinal Leonardo Sandri of Argentina, a veteran Vatican official, and Odilo Pedro Scherer of Sao Paulo, Brazil.

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