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A pope of ironies in Cuba and Mexico

John L. Allen Jr. | Apr. 9, 2012

Pope Benedict XVI meets with Cuba's former President Fidel Castro at the apostolic nunciature in Havana March 28. (CNS/Reuters/L'Osservatore Romano)

Analysis

Although Pope Benedict XVI?s March 23-28 outing to Mexico and Cuba officially constituted one voyage, in reality it was a tale of two trips. In Cuba, the pontiff was at his most political, engaging in a delicate and controversial tête-à-tête with the Castro regime; in Mexico, Benedict instead focused on the pastoral, featuring a gentle debunking of clericalism.

Benedict?s six-day journey, which took him to the León archdiocese in Mexico and Santiago and Havana in Cuba, was the 23rd foreign outing of his papacy, but his first to Spanish-speaking Latin America. (The pontiff visited Brazil in 2007.)

From a media point of view, the spotlight was clearly on Cuba, where the pontiff met both 80-year-old Raúl Castro, the current president, and his 85-year-old brother Fidel, father of the island nation?s revolution. Benedict, who also turns 85 on April 16, reportedly told the ailing Fidel that despite his age, ?I can still do my job.?

As if to prove the point, Benedict walked a political and diplomatic tightrope while on Cuban soil March 26-28.

Given that the church is virtually the lone institution that has maintained some autonomy from the government, Benedict?s every word was scoured for political significance. For instance, when he stood in Havana?s Revolutionary Square on March 28 under a massive banner of Che Guevara and warned of ?irrationality and fanaticism,? it was widely taken as a challenge to Cuba?s Marxist ideology.

Yet Benedict also denounced the U.S.-imposed embargo, and declined requests to meet with dissidents. Those moves led to criticism of the trip as a public relations coup for the Castro brothers.

?I?m exceedingly disappointed,? said Rep. Mario Diaz-Balart, a Florida Republican. ?[The pope] refused to meet with any members of the opposition. ... He refused to condemn human rights violations in any meaningful

way.?

Conservative talk show host Ninoska Pérez was equally disgruntled.

?I believe the complacent attitude towards a 53-year-old dictatorship was unnecessary,? she said. ?To ignore the repression, the arrests of the opposition, the persons who were beaten -- including right there at the Mass -- is unacceptable.?

On background, Vatican officials said that while Benedict sympathizes with the dissidents, he didn?t want to do anything that might prompt blowback from the regime, especially for Catholics who have to live in Cuba long after the pope has returned to Rome.

One fruit of that diplomatic tact came with a decision by the Cuban government to declare Good Friday this year a holiday, for the first time since the 1959 revolution.

In Mexico, meanwhile, the pontiff largely steered clear of politics, in part because of looming national elections in July. Several senior figures in the Mexican hierarchy are perceived as aligned in favor of the conservative National Action Party, and Vatican officials privately expressed concern that the trip might be seen as a campaign rally.

The closest Benedict came to a clear social message was his denunciation of the ?false promises, lies and deception? behind the drug trade. An estimated 50,000 people have been killed in drug-related violence since 2006, when the Mexican government launched a crackdown on the country?s notorious cartels.

Strikingly, although Mexico City has legalized both abortion and same-sex marriage, the pontiff did not directly engage those issues, restricting himself to a passing reference to ?defense and respect for human life.?

It almost seemed as if Benedict went out of his way to stress the apolitical character of his presence.

In León?s Bicentennial Park March 25, he offered a meditation on ?Cristo Rey,? meaning ?Christ the King,? which was the rallying cry of the *Cristeros* during the Mexican Revolution, and is still invoked today by elements of the Mexican church as a political banner.

?His kingdom does not stand on the power of his armies subduing others through force or violence,? the pope said. ?It rests on a higher power that wins over hearts -- the love of God.?

Mexico was the natural platform for Benedict to speak to all of Latin America. More than 40 percent of the world?s 1.2 billion Catholics live in Latin America, but the church there sustained significant losses during the late 20th century -- partly due to secularism, but even more to the rapid growth of Pentecostal and evangelical Christianity.

Facing those setbacks, Benedict issued a strong plug for the idea of a ?continental mission,? formulated by the Latin American bishops during a 2007 assembly in Aparecida, Brazil, that Benedict attended.

In Mexico, Benedict implied that one pillar of a continental mission should be overcoming the clericalist ethos

often associated with Latin American Catholicism, in which God is conceived as a cosmic monarch and the lay role is understood in passive terms.

Aboard the papal plane Benedict stressed a ?Christianity of the essentials,? including a God who is ?small and close.?

?This synthesis of the great and majestic God, as well as the small God who?s close to me and who shows me the values of my life, is the nucleus of evangelization,? he said.

The pontiff?s most direct swipe at clericalism came in an address to the bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean in León?s cathedral March 25.

?Greater attention is due to the members of the lay faithful most engaged in the fields of catechesis, liturgical animation, charitable activity and social commitment,? he said. ?Their faith formation is critical if the Gospel is to become present and fruitful in contemporary society.?

Pointedly, he directed the bishops to respect their laity.

?It is not right for [the laity] to feel treated like second-class citizens in the church,? the pope said, ?despite the committed work that they carry out in accordance with their proper vocation, and the great sacrifice that this dedication at times demands of them.?

Benedict will celebrate the seventh anniversary of his election later this month, and his outing to Mexico and Cuba adds another chapter to what has already been, in many ways, a papacy of ironies.

In Cuba, a pope who first came to prominence by rejecting liberation theology in Latin America, on the basis of its alleged ties to Marxism, made nice with the region?s most notorious communist regime; and in Mexico, a pope long associated with a high-church outlook, including the defense of clerical authority, delivered a compelling case against clericalism.

The fabric of history, however, is often stitched with irony, and thus it was on Benedict?s March swing south of the border.

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