

On trip about unity, Catholic division a striking omission

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Although popes always say the primary purpose of their travel is to “confirm the brothers and sisters in the faith,” when a particular journey is fraught with social and political drama, sometimes the issues facing the local Catholic community end up yielding pride of place.

In Lebanon, both the pope and his hosts understandably wanted to broadcast images of harmony to the wider world, as a counter-narrative to the dominant Middle Eastern storyline of the day — a wave of anti-American and anti-American violence which, at last count, has engulfed at least 20 nations in the region and beyond.

As a result, the top note throughout the trip was Benedict as a “messenger of peace,” and Lebanon as “a model to the inhabitants of the whole region and the entire world.” The ubiquitous presence of Muslim clerics and ordinary believers alike at virtually all the papal events was heralded as a remarkable “symbol of tolerance” (the front-page headline in Lebanon’s *Daily Star*.)

Given the regional situation, that emphasis was understandable, but in some ways it came at the price of addressing issues directly pertinent to local Catholic life. In that arena, especially arresting was the lack of any direct reference to the chronic challenge of internal Catholic division, which parallels the overall Christian situation here, and which many observers describe in terms of persistent tribal rivalries.

As a blog entry published recently by the Canadian “Salt and Light” network put it, the stereotype of Christianity in the region is that it is “intractably, scandalously divided.”

When John Paul II travelled to Lebanon in 1997, he issued a direct call to Catholics to put those divisions aside. He asked them to reject a “confessional mentality,” in which their first loyalty is to their own rite or faction, in favor of an “authentic sense of the church.” He pointedly insisted that “power struggles” among Catholic subgroups must end, describing them as an untoward expression of “egoism.”

There was little such rhetoric from Benedict this time around.

Observers of the Christian scene in the Middle East say the challenge of division occurs on at least three levels.

First, there are traditional confessional rivalries among the various Eastern churches in communion with Rome, such as the Maronites, Greek Melkites, Armenian Catholics, Syriac Catholics, Chaldean Catholics, and so on, as well as the Latin rite church. Those intra-Catholic fault lines are compounded by tensions between Catholics and other denominations, such as the Greek Orthodox church.

The emblematic case is probably Jerusalem’s Church of the Holy Sepulchre, where six different Christian denominations jealously protect their historical rights. At least three times in the past decade, police had to

separate monks and lay faithful of the various confessions involved in brawls over perceived slights or acts of aggression at the church.

Second, the Christians of the region, laity and clergy alike, are also frequently divided in their political allegiances, with Lebanon offering a classic case in point.

When John Paul arrived fifteen years ago, Lebanese Christians were united against a foreign occupation — two of them, actually, since Syria dominated much of the country, while a strip of southern Lebanon was under Israeli control. Today, the country's Christians are splintered. Some, including former general and politician Michel Aoun, are allied with the Hezbollah and sympathetic to Bashar al-Assad, the president of Syria. Others, especially the "March 14 alliance," are strongly anti-Syrian and anti-Iranian.

Third, a new fault line has been formed by the little known fact that Christianity is not merely in decline across the Middle East; in some places, it's also growing like gangbusters.

According to Vatican statistics, there are now 20 million Christians in the region, of whom 12 million are natives, mostly Arabs, and roughly eight million are recent arrivals, mostly foreign "guest workers." While the Arab Christian population has been dropping for decades, driven largely by emigration, the foreign national constituency is experiencing dramatic growth, especially in the Gulf states, and before long it could actually represent the largest piece of the Christian pie.

For sure, the two groups face some common challenges, most fundamentally restrictions in many states on their freedom to practice Christianity openly. Yet sociologically, observers say, these two groups tend to inhabit different planets, with relatively little contact or sense of common cause.

In his apostolic exhortation summarizing the results of the 2010 synod, Benedict referred to the growingly complex nature of the church here, noting, "Native and immigrant Catholics together constitute the current reality of Catholicism in the region."

He added that, "For God there is only one people, and for believers only one faith!" He did not, however, propose any practical measures to promote a greater sense of cohesion.

Likewise, Benedict did not directly touch on the issue of intra-Catholic unity in any of his public addresses. Vatican officials repeatedly stressed, however, that he made a point of visiting each of the four patriarchates in Lebanon — Maronite, Greek Melkite, Armenian and Syriac — as a way of underlining they're all important.

In the exhortation, the pope alluded to "the unity of the faith amid the diversity of traditions", but did not identify any instances in which that unity seems imperiled, or any pastoral strategies for overcoming it.

That too, was in contrast to John Paul's 1997 exhortation on Lebanon, where he got into specifics such as the desirability of seminarians from the different Catholic churches living together for a year during their formation, and the creation of "inter-patriarchal associations" and joint commissions to tackle pressing pastoral and social concerns.

Given the drama of civil war in Syria and a wave of anti-Western protests across the region that seemed to revive fears of a "clash of civilizations," Benedict clearly had other fish to fry. Clearly, too, papal rhetoric alone does not suffice to solve deep-seated regional problems, whether it's the emigration of Arab Christians or the fissures within Catholic life.

That said, the question of Catholic unity arguably looms as the most striking omission of Benedict's 2012 stop in the Middle East, a note one might have expected him to sound in advance which, in the end, was more

conspicuous by its absence.

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