

## Some interesting nuggets around the edges

John L. Allen Jr. | May. 31, 2006 All Things Catholic

*Czestochowa, Poland*

**Editor's Note:** Read **NCRonline.org** daily for John Allen's reports on Pope Benedict XVI's trip to Poland May 25-28.

Sometimes on papal trips, individual events offer more subtext than text. That is, the event may not present a single towering story, but it does occasion some interesting nuggets around the edges.

Benedict XVI's stop in Czestochowa, home of the shrine of Jasna Góra and the famed icon of the Black Madonna, was in some ways a classic example.

In his prepared remarks, the pope issued a strong but undramatic message. He called priests back to the fundamentals of priestly life, including prayer and the sacraments; asked religious to rekindle the fervor of the first moment of their vocations; and offered generous support to the "new movements" in the church.

In typical fashion, Benedict's remarks were well-crafted, and both intellectually and spiritually challenging, but lacked a single dramatic phrase that will generate headlines.

Yet that's not to say the stop lacked sizzle.

For one thing, there was the irony that aside from Benedict himself, the two most important personalities of the afternoon were, in a physical sense, not on hand: John Paul II and the Virgin Mary.

References to John Paul have run like a scarlet thread through Benedict's trip, and Czestochowa offered them in particularly concentrated form. They included an enormous statue of the late pope that looms over the hillside, as well as a banner that a group of followers of the Neocatechumenate Way unfurled when Benedict appeared: "We are all yours, Benedict," it read in Spanish, a pledge of loyalty, but at the same time an echo of John Paul's famous motto *Totus Tuus*, "all yours," in reference to Mary.

Barricades at Jasna Góra were also dotted with Solidarity banners, evoking memories of the special symbiosis between John Paul and what was then an insurgent Polish labor movement, before it evolved into a now-unpopular political party.

The chapel of Jasna Góra also evokes John Paul's memory in another, more painful way.

That chapel contains the sash that John Paul was wearing on May 13, 1981, when he was shot in St. Peter's Square. One of the bullets that struck the pope that day passed through that sash on its way into his abdomen. Because the pope narrowly averted death on the Feast of Our Lady of Fatima, he attributed his escape to the

intervention of the Blessed Virgin. The bullet from the attack is now in the statue of the Virgin in Fatima, but the sash is here, displayed in a case next to the icon. John Paul's blood is clearly visible.

Clearly, John Paul wanted to thank Poland's most famous Madonna too.

Drawing on these Marian overtones, Benedict weaved references to Mary throughout his remarks. To make that symbolism even more fitting, Friday was Mother's Day in Poland.

Another bit of subtext to the Jasna Góra stop concerns Poland's not-so-distant past under Communist rule.

In a pointed reminder of that oppression, Benedict presented the shrine with a silver rose that Paul VI had intended to bring in 1966, but was blocked by the Communist authorities. The rose had remained for 40 years in the Vatican, and Benedict told the crowd he was happy "from the bottom of his heart" to be able to deliver it at last.

Another aspect of Poland's past also cropped up.

Before Benedict arrived, many expected the visit of a German pope to Poland to raise questions of German/Polish reconciliation, and that wrinkle cropped up this afternoon in novel fashion.

Benedict has deliberately chosen not to speak in German on this trip, so as to avoid awakening bitter memories of the 1939 Nazi invasion of Poland. The gesture has been appreciated by many Poles, many of whom have also praised the quality of Benedict's Polish.

In Czestochowa, the Poles took the initiative to break the taboo themselves, by shouting a German greeting to Benedict: *Gross Gott, Heilige Vater!*, meaning, "Hello, Holy Father!" in traditional Bavarian fashion.

A final bit of subtext cropped up in equally subtle fashion.

Prior to the trip, many Poles had wondered if Benedict would say something, either in public or behind closed doors, about Radio Maryja, a powerful Polish Catholic broadcaster which is close to the new center-right government, and which occasionally generates controversy for content some critics find xenophobic and anti-Semitic.

In its edition covering the week of Benedict's trip, the *Warsaw Business Journal*, a leading English-language Polish publication, demanded that the new government distance itself from Radio Maryja and its charismatic leader, Fr. Tadeusz Rydzyk, citing especially the broadcaster's reputation for anti-Semitism.

Loyal Catholic boosters of Radio Maryja, on the other hand, are hoping Benedict will encourage rather than curtail the broadcaster's activity. One group of fans managed to snag a front-and-center location at Jasna Góra, and unfurled a banner with a simple request:

"Holy Father," it read, "please bless Radio Maryja!"

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