

The pope in Spain

John L. Allen Jr. | Jul. 14, 2006 All Things Catholic

Benedict XVI's July 8-9

trip to Valencia, Spain, offered a classic illustration of the dilemma facing popes when it comes to secular politics, an arena in which they are almost literally damned if they do, damned if they don't. If they take a stand, they risk being accused of interference in the secular sphere; if they don't, critics will complain about their silence.

The solution modern popes have embraced is to speak in generalities that usually leave little doubt as to their mind, but avoiding direct statements about particular politicians, governments, or debates. That's just what Benedict did during his brief, 26-hour trip to Valencia, Spain, for the close of the fifth Vatican-sponsored "World Meeting of Families."

Media interest was fueled by a showdown between Benedict and the Socialist Prime Minister, José Luis Rodr'guez Zapatero, whose full-court press in favor of gay marriage, embryonic stem cell research, divorce, and a wide variety of other issues has created church/state tensions not seen since the Spanish Civil War.

Benedict XVI did not mince words in articulating the church's traditional vision of the family and of human sexuality.

"Attempts are being made to organize the life of society on the basis of subjective and ephemeral desires alone, with no reference to objective, prior truths such as the dignity of each human being and his inalienable rights and duties, which every social group is called to serve," the pope said in a Sunday morning Mass attended by one and a half million people.

In a similar vein, Benedict exhorted the Spanish bishops to "dauntlessly proclaim that prescinding from God, acting as if he did not exist or relegating faith to the purely private sphere, undermines the truth about man and compromises the future of culture and society."

Such language induced some observers to see Benedict's trip largely as an anti-Zapatero protest. Crowd reaction fueled that impression, since whenever Zapatero made an appearance, he drew lusty "boos" and acerbic chants. (One example: Banners were hung in Valencia in the days leading up to Benedict's arrival saying "We're waiting for you." When Zapatero arrived at the archbishop's palace for his meeting with the pope, the

crowd began to shout, "Zapatero, we're *not* waiting for you!")

Yet Benedict is also an instinctively gracious figure, who was never going to engage in the sort of verbal fisticuffs many expected.

The pope met not only with Zapatero but also with his top deputy, Mar'a Teresa Fernández de la Vega, and both sides later described the encounter as friendly and productive. Indeed, Spanish sources told *NCR* that after his chat with Fernández de la Vega, the pope told her that he felt church/state relations in Spain are "in good hands."

Benedict also resisted the temptation to "go negative," ducking invitations to specifically excoriate Zapatero's policies. Asked by reporters on the papal plane about the gay marriage law, for example, Benedict said he didn't want to start off with negative things, but preferred to focus on the many healthy and happy families "which give us hope for the future," before going on to restate that marriage is based on an indissoluble bond between a man and a woman.

Beyond disagreements with Zapatero, the pope also realized there's business to be done in other areas.

Spanish sources told *NCR* that negotiations between Cardinal Antonio Cañizares Llovera of Toledo, representing the Spanish bishops, and Fernández de la Vega seem to be making progress on two especially thorny issues: the question of teaching religion in public schools, and of public funding for church activities.

Benedict did not want to engage in rhetorical fireworks that might disrupt those talks, or shut down the possibility of future conversation on other matters.

The price of such a balancing act is that it leaves partisans on both sides unsatisfied. Those sympathetic to Zapatero resented what they saw as an overtly political tone to the trip, while the Prime Minister's most dogged Catholic critics wished the pope would have more publicly taken him to the woodshed.

Yet most Spaniards with whom I spoke seemed to feel Benedict had made his point.

"In my opinion, the pope was very direct, very clear," said Maria Mendez, 44, a mother of eight who told *NCR* she had traveled from Madrid in part "to support the pope."

"He didn't need to mention Zapatero by name," Mendez said.

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Such analysis risks the impression that Benedict's agenda in Valencia was basically political, when the pope sees himself far more as a pastor and a catechist than a politician. His primary message was not a call to barricades against the Socialists, but rather that the traditional Christian conception of the family is the best path to human flourishing.

"Lifting one's gaze to the living God, the guarantor of our freedom and of truth, is a premise for arriving at a new humanity," he said in the Valencia cathedral.

In a "Festival of Families" Saturday night, he returned to the theme.

"We have gathered here from so many parts of the world as a community which with gratitude and joy bears witness that human beings were created in the image and likeness of God for love, and that complete human fulfillment only comes about when we make a sincere gift of ourselves to others," he said.

The heart of Benedict's argument was expressed in this paragraph from his Saturday text.

"Christian faith and ethics are not meant to stifle love, but to make it healthier, stronger and more truly free," he said. "Human love needs to be purified and to mature if it is to be fully human and the principle of a true and lasting joy."

At what one might call the "retail" pastoral level, Benedict was concerned with broadening the conception of the family beyond the nuclear unit of parents and children, giving attention especially to the role of grandparents.

In his remarks Saturday night, Pope Benedict included a special appeal for grandparents, urging that "in no way should they ever be excluded from the family circle."

Before the pope spoke, a series of families from different parts of the world offered brief "testimonies." Italian actor Lino Banfi, best known for his role as a grandfather in the popular series *Un Medico in Famiglia*, told Benedict that some people call the actor "Italy's grandfather."

Banfi said that he responds, "If I'm the grandfather of Italy, then our pope is the grandfather of the world!"

During Sunday's Mass, Benedict returned to the theme, insisting that families must be understood as including "not only parents and children, but also grandparents and ancestors."

"The family thus appears to us as a community of generations and the guarantee of a patrimony of traditions," the pope said.

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