NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

The Vatican responds to crisis in Middle East

John L. Allen Jr. | Jul. 21, 2006 All Things Catholic

Even when leaders aren?t looking to make news, sometimes the news finds them. Such was the case this week for Benedict XVI, whose plan to spend a quiet few days of vacation in Valle d?Aosta was thrown a curve when he found himself drawn in on the margins of the expanding conflict in Lebanon.

In the peaks and valleys that seem always to characterize the relationship between the Vatican and Israel, and between the Catholic church and Judaism, this episode so far represents another valley.

On July 14, the Vatican?s outgoing Secretary of State, Italian Cardinal Angelo Sodano, commented on the clashes between Israeli forces and Hezbollah in southern Lebanon on Vatican Radio. While denouncing terrorism, Sodano also said the Holy See ?deplored? the Israeli incursion into Lebanon, a ?free and sovereign nation,? as well as ?a people which has already suffered for the defense of its independence.?

?Defense by a state is not exempt from abidance by the norms of international law, especially as regards the safeguarding of civilian populations,? Sodano added, in a clear reference to the Israeli offensive, stressing that ?it seems clear that the only way to find a way out of the powder-keg is the path of sincere dialogue between the sides involved.?

As if to underline Sodano?s argument, the Holy See Press Office issued his comments as an official declaration. An official Hezbollah radio station rebroadcast Sodano?s statement that day.

Two days later, Benedict XVI spoke on the crisis during his Sunday Angelus address, lamenting civilian casualties in the Holy Land and appealing to leaders to ?return to the path of reason ? opening new possibilities for dialogue and understanding.?

?In recent days, the news from the Holy Land are a cause of new and grave concern for all, in particular the extension of armed conflict into Lebanon, and for the numerous civilian victims,? the pope said.

?At the origin of so many bitter conflicts are, unfortunately, objective situations of the violation of law and of justice. Neither terrorist acts nor reprisals, above all when there are tragic consequences for civilian populations, can be justified. On this path, as bitter experience demonstrates, positive results cannot be achieved.?

Benedict noted that Sunday was the feast day of the Madonna of Carmel, a mountain in the Holy Land, which dominates Haifa, ?which has also been hit,? and is a few kilometers (miles) from Lebanon. He urged local churches to pray especially for peace in the Holy Land and throughout the Middle East.

Lebanon has a large Maronite Catholic population.

This ?on the one hand, on the other hand? style of Vatican statements on the Middle East, criticizing both terrorist actions by groups such as Hezbollah as well as the inevitable Israeli response, has long irritated Israelis and Jewish leaders, who see an implicit moral equivalence between terrorism and legitimate self-defense. Privately, they often suggest that the Vatican?s judgment may be influenced by local church leaders in the Middle East, who are generally Arab and often fiercely pro-Palestinian.

On background, Vatican diplomats respond that they would have little objection to carefully targeted strikes against terrorists, but they cannot condone seemingly indiscriminate attacks that produce significant civilian casualties. Moreover, they argue, military solutions will not produce a lasting peace until a just solution is offered to the Palestinian problem.

On July 17, the Anti-Defamation League in the United States issued a press release calling the Vatican statements on the conflict ?terribly one-sided and short-sighted.?

?The Vatican continues to be mired in a false paradigm that equates, on the one side, terrorist actions by Islamist extremists who view both Jews and Christians as infidels and seek Israel?s destruction with, on the other side, Israel?s right to defend itself and eliminate the ongoing and growing threats to its citizens,? the press release asserted.

?We call on the Holy See to reconsider its position in this time of crisis and stand up for Israel which is being forced to fight a war for survival on two borders,? the statement said.

Israeli officials told *NCR* they largely agree with the ADL?s criticism.

It should be noted, however, that it wasn?t just Jewish sources objecting to the comments from Sodano and the pope.

Speaking on Fox News July 16, Col. David Hunt, an American expert on counter-terrorism, called the statements ?outrageous,? saying the Vatican ?is not losing any soldiers.?

?Let them talk all they want,? he said. ?Look at the moral imperative after the Israeli soldiers can come back. But they?ve got the right to help their soldiers.?

Aside from the rights and wrongs, this background may help explain why senior Israeli officials have been ambivalent about resolving the long-running financial and legal disputes over the status of church-affiliated institutions in the country. It also makes Benedict?s projected 2007 trip to Israel all the more interesting, lending it a political and diplomatic subtext beyond its obvious significance in terms of Jewish-Christian relations.

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On July 20, the Holy See Press Office issued a declaration on the Lebanon crisis.

?Facing the aggravation of the situation in the Middle East, the Press Office of the Holy See has been authorized to communicate the following:

1. The Holy Father is following the fate of all the populations involved with great concern, and has indicated the next Sunday, July 23, as a special day of prayer and penance, inviting pastors and faithful of all the particular churches as well as all believers in the world to implore God for the precious gift of peace.
2. In particular, the Supreme Pontiff hopes that prayer will be raised to the Lord for an immediate cease-fire between the parties, that humanitarian corridors will immediately be created to bring help to the suffering populations, and that rational and responsible negotiations will begin for bringing an end to the objective

situations of injustice which exist in that region, as already indicated by Pope Benedict XVI in his Angelus of last Sunday, the 16th of this month.

3. In reality, the Lebanese have the right to see the integrity and sovereignty of their country respected, the Israelis have the right to live in peace in their state and the Palestinians have the right to have a free and sovereign nation.
4. In this painful moment, His Holiness addresses an appeal to charitable organizations to help all the populations struck by this bitter conflict.?

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Benedict made one further comment on the crisis in Lebanon during brief remarks to reporters on July 18, endorsing a G-8 statement that that criticized the militant groups Hamas and Hezbollah for fueling an escalation in fighting and urged Israel to exercise restraint.

?I find myself in full agreement with the G-8 communique,? he said.

Meanwhile, Italian Cardinal Renato Martino, President of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, said on the same day that the violence is to be ?repudiated, both the terrorist acts on the one side and the military retaliation on the other,? as they ?constitute a violation of law and of the most basic principles of justice.?

Martino also warned that any use of weapons of mass destruction would represent ?a tragic page in the history of the human family.?

As a footnote, on Monday Benedict visited an enclosed Carmelite convent in the Italian Alps during one of his vacation excursions. The superior of the community, Sr. Maria, later told the Italian news agency Ansa that the pope had spoken with them about the international situation.

?He asked to pray also for the terrorists, because they don?t know that they?re hurting not only their neighbors, but above all themselves,? she said.

The e-mail address for John L. Allen Jr. is **href="mailto:jallen@natcath.org">jallen@ncronline.org**

Source URL (retrieved on *12/13/2013 - 10:56*): http://ncronline.org/blogs/all-things-catholic/vatican-responds-crisis-middle-east