

Benedict's priorities: Feeding humanity's spiritual and material hunger

John L. Allen Jr. | May. 11, 2007 All Things Catholic

[Editor's Note: John Allen is posting daily reports from Brazil during Pope Benedict XVI's May 9-13 to São Paulo and Aparecida, in conjunction with the Fifth General Conference of the Bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean (CELAM). Read Allen's daily reports at his [Daily News and Updates](#)[1] column on [NCRcafe.org](#).]

After the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), no local Catholic church on earth seized the social thrust of the council's message with more enthusiasm than Brazil. The largest Catholic country on earth, Brazil also became the most important laboratory for liberation theology, which proclaimed a "preferential option for the poor" and thrust the church into struggles for progressive social change.

At the time, then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger was the architect of the Vatican's efforts to rein in liberation theology's more avant-garde elements. Now, some two decades after those battles, Pope Benedict XVI has come to Brazil, and to a great extent his May 9-13 trip can be read as the fruit of his mature reflection on the issues first raised during the crisis over liberation theology in the 1980s.

In effect, Benedict's message amounts to a Brazilian and Latin American application of the argument of his recent book, *Jesus of Nazareth*: No program of social reform will succeed if it is not anchored in the deep truths about God and the meaning of human life revealed in Jesus Christ, and transmitted through the doctrines and traditions of the Catholic church.

In São Paulo Friday morning, Benedict insisted that the saints of our epoch are the "true reformers," quoting his own homily during his first foreign trip in Cologne, Germany: "Only from the saints, only from God does true revolution come."

When Benedict was asked to approve the motto of the Fifth General Conference of the Bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean, which he will formally open tomorrow in Aparecida, it was "Disciples and missionaries of Jesus Christ, so that our people may have life." The pope asked that the final phrase be amended to, "so that our people may have life *in Him*. That Christological flourish hinted at the leitmotif of the trip.

So far, Brazil has offered an intriguing mix of what many regard as "the real Ratzinger," with tough talk on

abortion, marriage, priestly celibacy and ecclesiastical discipline, along with the more pastoral Benedict -- praising the late Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador; urging work on behalf of the poor, the Amazon rainforest, and in general for "a more just and fraternal society"; and, by virtue of his very choice to be here, offering an olive branch to a Brazilian church long seen as estranged from Rome.

At bottom, Benedict's pitch seems to be that the famous social commitment of Brazilian Catholicism -- which he certainly has endorsed -- must nevertheless yield pride of place to a clear focus on Catholic fundamentals, above all what the pope calls "the primacy of God." There are no short-cuts, the pope has implied; one cannot defend the poor without defending the family and the unborn, and one cannot serve humanity without feeding its spiritual as well as material hunger. The failure to keep those priorities clear, he suggested in an address to Brazilian bishops on Friday, goes a long way towards explaining the losses of the Catholic church to Pentecostal and Evangelical "sects."

That message has played well with the enthusiastic crowds that have greeted him, but those crowds have been relatively small in the context of the largest Catholic country in the world. The estimated 600,000 to 800,000 people who came to his major outdoor Mass in São Paulo on Friday, for example, represent just 2 to 2.5 percent of the roughly 30 million inhabitants of the greater metropolitan area, the overwhelming majority of whom are at least nominally Catholic.

Of course, the content of a papal trip can never be reduced to a single sound-bite. The Brazil trip carries different significance depending upon one's point of view, which perhaps can be best expressed in terms of concentric circles: the local church in Brazil, the church in Latin America, social and political life in Latin America, and finally the universal church and the world.

The Local Church

For many Brazilian Catholics, the pope's presence marks an end to their "years in the wilderness," a 30-year period of on-again, off-again tension between Brazil and Rome. During that time, many in the Vatican saw Brazil as a church in which the "social gospel" of liberation theology had eclipsed more primary spiritual and doctrinal principles, while many Brazilian Catholics regarded Rome as "out of touch" and insensitive to the country's urgent social challenges.

Signs of Brazil's "troubled child" status in Catholic affairs are not hard to find.

For example, when CELAM, the umbrella group for the Bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean, was founded, the idea was that its presidency would rotate between a Brazilian and someone from another Latin American country, representing the two great linguistic and cultural streams of Latin America, Portuguese and Spanish. Since 1979, however, no Brazilian has served as president of CELAM. Among the Brazilian bishops,

the running joke is that the highest office in CELAM to which a Brazilian can aspire is a second vice-presidency. (In fact, the newly elected president of the Brazilian bishops' conference, Archbishop Geraldo Lyrio Rocha of Mariana, is a second vice-president in CELAM).

At the level of the universal church, the fact that Brazil has only two cardinals under the age of 80 and thus eligible to elect the next pope, despite being the largest Catholic country in the world, is a clear signal that something isn't quite right. The United States, by way of contrast, currently has 12 cardinal-electors.

In that light, many Brazilian Catholics were impressed that Benedict XVI made a personal choice to come here.

The Bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean (CELAM) had initially planned to hold their fifth General Conference in Quito, Ecuador. After a change in leadership within CELAM, the leading candidates were Santiago, Chile, and Buenos Aires, Argentina. Eventually the choice fell on Buenos Aires, which would have given us the storyline of the new pope being hosted by the man who was, in effect, his runner-up in the conclave of 2005, Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio of Argentina. Benedict, however, asked that the event be staged in Brazil.

The pope had already accepted an invitation to visit the Marian shrine at Aparecida, and logistically holding the CELAM meeting there avoided the possibility of two overseas voyages. More profoundly, however, many Brazilian Catholics took Benedict's choice as a signal of personal interest. Brazilian sources say the pope was deeply struck by an address given by Cardinal Claudio Hummes at the Synod on the Eucharist in 2005, when Hummes, then the Archbishop of São Paulo, surveyed the growth of Pentecostalism and secularism and pointedly asked, "How much longer will Brazil remain a Catholic country?"

Since then, Benedict XVI has called Hummes to Rome as the Prefect of the Congregation for Clergy, creating a badly needed line of communication between Brazil and the Vatican. By deciding to come to Brazil in person, the pope is also trying to give the church here a shot in the arm.

"This visit normalizes Brazil's situation within the universal church," said Fr. Jose Oscar Beozzo, a priest of the Lins diocese near São Paulo, and a leading expert on the country's religion situation. Beozzo predicted that the warmth and joy with which Benedict has been received will reinforce this rapprochement, and leave the pope with a positive impression of Brazil.

To forgive, however, is not necessarily to forget. In a tough speech to the some 430 bishops of Brazil in a meeting in the Cathedral da Sé in São Paulo on Friday, Benedict issued a unmistakable call to discipline.

Saying he wanted to address "the most important themes that impose themselves on my consideration as pastor

of the universal church," Benedict stressed:

- Placing the faith and sacramental life of the church first, before involvement in social and political problems;
- Defending life against "offenses justified in the name of individual liberty";
- Opposing divorce and "free unions";
- Defending priestly celibacy, and in general steering priests away from "ideological and political, even partisan" attitudes;
- Offering deep evangelization and catechesis to Catholics, to protect them from the "aggressive proselytism of the sects";
- Ensuring that individual confession, rather than communal rites, remains the normal form of the sacrament;
- Restoring a sense of the sacred to liturgies, and ensuring that liturgical rules are observed;
- Ensuring that the faith is transmitted "without reductive visions and confusion about the mission" of the church;
- Avoiding "the risk of deviations in the area of sexuality";
- Promoting a "frank" form of ecumenism, capable not only of dialogue, but also of defending the faith.

"The integrity of the faith, together with ecclesiastical discipline, is and always will be a theme that requires the attention and commitment of all of you, above all when it's a matter of drawing the consequences of the fact that 'there is only one faith and one baptism,'" Benedict XVI told the bishops.

The Church in Latin America

The primary purpose of Benedict's visit is to open the Fifth General Conference of CELAM in Aparecida, which will run until May 31. That meeting is intended to craft strategy to carry Latin American Catholicism through the next decade or so, in the face of enormous challenges: the growth of Pentecostal churches and movements eating into Catholic populations; a widespread priest shortage that leaves the church's pastoral net with gaping holes; and a progressive secularization and abandonment of religious faith, which has consequences for the continent's political and cultural future.

To offer just one example of the enormity of these challenges, Beozzo pointed out that Brazil has just over 18,000 priests to serve a Catholic population of some 140 million or more. Meanwhile, he said, the Assemblies of God in Brazil, with an estimated 8.5 million faithful, has more than 52,000 pastors. The clergy-to-person ratio for the Catholic church in Brazil is 1 to 8,604; for the Assemblies of God, it's 1 to 35. No surprise which group is in a better position to deliver routine pastoral care.

In that light, the CELAM conference is expected to embrace a more aggressive model of lay involvement in the church's ministries. Already, Beozzo pointed out, 80 percent of the Sunday celebrations in Brazil are led by laity, simply because there aren't enough priests to say Mass. Benedict's repeated appeals to various groups of

laity in Brazil to become active in the church's efforts at evangelization and pastoral outreach may reinforce the movement in this direction.

In his address to the Brazilian bishops on Friday, Benedict called the defection a "motive of just concern," and said that in his view, the primary cause was the lack of an approach to evangelization "in which Christ and his church stand at the center of every exposition." That has left too many Catholics, he said, "with a fragile faith, sometimes confused, vacillating and naïve, even if they still have an innate religiosity."

Benedict called for an aggressive program of evangelization and missionary outreach, carried out by priests, religious and laity, and aimed especially at the urban peripheries, where Catholic losses are often the greatest. He endorsed the growth of lay movements, while stressing that they need to remain in alignment "with their pastors and in conformity with the orientations of the diocese."

More generally, the pope's presence in Latin America is a sign of the importance he attaches to the region.

"This is the largest Catholic continent, and therefore in a sense it's the largest responsibility of the pope," Benedict said. "Naturally, I desire in a special way that the largest Catholic continent should also be an exemplary continent, where the great human problems can be resolved and where we work together with the bishops, with priests, religious and laity, so that this great Catholic continent will also be a continent of life and, really, of hope. For me, this is a primordial responsibility."

One point of special importance for Latin America is that Benedict appears to want to close the page on old battles over liberation theology.

On Thursday, he held a brief meeting with the emeritus Archbishop of São Paulo, Cardinal Paulo Arns, a church liberal who often crossed swords with then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger in the 1980s. The meeting was widely taken as a gesture of reconciliation. Benedict also spoke in positive terms about the eventual beatification of the most important hero of the liberation theology movement, the late Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador. Aboard the papal plane, Benedict said he had "no doubt" about Romero's worthiness for the honor.

On Friday, the pope even invoked a version of the "preferential option for the poor," the famous slogan of liberation theology. "The poor are the privileged audience for the gospel," he said.

At the same time, Benedict left no doubt about what he sees as the proper Christian approach to social problems.

"Where faith in Jesus Christ is absent, faith in his presence in the sacramental celebrations, the essential element for the solution of urgent social and political problems is also missing," he said. In a classic formula, Benedict phrased this in terms of defending the "primacy of God."

Society and Politics in Latin America

On the one hand, the Brazil trip has offered flashes of a pope determined to do battle with what he has called a "dictatorship of relativism." His comments aboard the papal plane about excommunication for pro-choice politicians, and his strong defense of life and marriage, are part of this pattern. Yet taking into consideration the entirety of what the pope has had to say, his focus has not been exclusively on the hot-button "culture wars."

Instead, the pope has pressed the case for what he calls "a more just and fraternal society, reconciled and peaceful," across a wide range of issues: defense of human life from conception to natural end, defense of the family, economic justice, struggles against corruption and violence, care for the elderly, and environmental concern, especially with regard to what he called the "devastation of the Amazon."

In a private meeting in a government palace in São Paulo on Thursday, President 'Luiz ' Inacio Lula da Silva and Pope Benedict steered clear of potential flash-points such as abortion and contraception, focusing instead on efforts to support families, education, and environmental concerns.

Benedict's visit on Saturday to a center for victims of drug and alcohol addiction, young mothers, needy families, the homeless and HIV/AIDS victims, called the "Farm of Hope" and inspired by the spirituality of the Focolare movement, is another way of demonstrating the church's "preferential option" for the vulnerable in Latin American societies.

In that sense, Benedict seems determined to challenge Latin America to embrace the whole of the church's social teaching, though without turning the Catholic church into a political party.

"The church does not practice politics, and we respect the secular nature of the state," Benedict said aboard the papal plane. "But we offer the conditions in which a healthy politics, and consequently solutions to social problems, can mature."

The Universal Church and the World

No doubt, the element of greatest immediate interest for broad Catholic discussion from the Brazil trip came at the very beginning, during the pope's airborne news conference. In light of reports that Mexican bishops had raised the question of excommunication politicians who voted in favor of legalizing abortion in Mexico City, Benedict was asked if he shared that position.

Here is the pope's word-for-word response, translated from the Italian:

"Yes, this excommunication was not something arbitrary, but it's part of the Code. It's based simply on the principle that the killing of an innocent human child is incompatible with going in communion with the Body of Christ. Thus, they didn't do anything new, anything surprising or arbitrary. In that light, they simply announced publicly what is contained in the law of the church, and the law of the church is based upon the doctrine and the faith of the church, which expresses our appreciation for life, that human individuality, human personality, is present from the first moment."

It's interesting to note that when the Vatican posted an official transcript of the press conference on its Web site on Thursday, these comments had been retouched slightly. The initial "yes" was removed, the phrase "this excommunication" became "the excommunication," and "they didn't do anything new" (with "they" referring to the Mexican bishops) became "this didn't invent anything new." The overall effect is to lift the comment a bit out of the specific Mexican context, making it more universal.

No sooner had the press conference broken up than the Vatican spokesperson, Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi, returned to the press compartment to say that the pope had not intended to break new ground. Moreover, Lombardi noted, the Mexican bishops haven't actually excommunicated anyone, and neither has the pope.

The overall effect was to leave some confusion as to the precise thrust of the pope's remarks -- shades of 2004, when both sides in the debate within American Catholicism over the issue of communion for pro-choice Democratic presidential candidate John Kerry cited different messages from then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger to support their positions.

What is to one to make of the mixed signals? Three conclusions seem warranted.

First, Benedict XVI clearly feels that a Catholic politician who knowingly and consistently supports abortion rights should not receive communion. Second, he's willing to put the weight of his office behind bishops who assert that principle in specific cases; that was the force of his answer to the question about Mexico.

Third, however, it's not yet clear if Benedict intends to impose that position on bishops who draw different

conclusions in other pastoral contexts. His support in 2004 for the position of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, which by a vote of 183-6 opted to leave the judgment up to individual bishops, suggests that Benedict may not yet be prepared to take that step.

At a minimum, Benedict's comments seem likely to embolden those forces in the church eager to take a harder line.

Setting aside the debate over abortion and excommunication, the basic message for the wider world that resonates from Benedict's presence in Brazil, and at the CELAM conference, is perhaps the most simple of all: Latin America matters.

"We know the problems of Latin America, and we want to mobilize the capacity of the church, its moral strength and its religious resources, to respond to the specific mission of the church, to our universal responsibility to the human person as such, and to society as such," Benedict said on Wednesday.

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