

## Four *Sfumature* from the Pope's trip to Sydney

John L. Allen Jr. | Jul. 24, 2008 All Things Catholic

Benedict XVI is back in Italy (at his summer residence in Castel Gandolfo, to be exact), following the ninth, and longest, foreign trip of his papacy. In Australia, the pope turned in what was, by most accounts, another bravura performance.

A measure of the success of these outings, at least at the level of public relations, is whether the local media feels obliged afterwards to run a feature story along the lines of "Erstwhile enforcer shows human face." The Germans wrote such stories in 2005 after World Youth Day in Cologne, the Spaniards did them after the pope's visit to Valencia in 2006, and the Americans followed suit three months ago.

Sure enough, Monday's *Sydney Morning Herald* featured the now-predictable headline: "From theologian to pope of the people."

Such glowing reviews, to an extent, may reflect the touch of the church's PR machine, as well as civic boosterism - local authorities invest considerable resources in hosting a papal visit, so no one wants them to fail. In Australia, the current estimate is that federal, state and local governments poured almost \$155 million into subsidizing World Youth Day.

All spin aside, however, Benedict XVI really does strike most people as kind and candid, and those two qualities are usually enough to generate positive impressions. Combine that with Benedict's erudition, as well as the elaborate choreography and massive turnout associated with a World Youth Day, and it's little wonder the Aussies were impressed.

Beyond good vibes and great pictures, however, the analytical question in the wake of the pope's July 12-21 trip is whether we saw or heard anything new, anything that might offer clues as to the future direction of the Catholic church or Benedict's papacy.

At that level, while the trip produced no earthquakes, it did offer a few of what the Italians would call *sfumature* - small nuances that can be meaningful. This week, I offer four such "*Sfumature* from Sydney." These are by no means the main points of the trip, but rather smaller matters around the edges where something unexpected or revealing broke through.

## **Benedict on the Sex Abuse Crisis**

Benedict once again tackled the sex abuse crisis head-on, beginning by responding to a question aboard the papal plane. Like the United States, the Catholic church in Australia has been rocked by waves of sex abuse scandals since the early 1990s, the most recent erupting just days before the pope's arrival, with unflattering revelations about how Cardinal George Pell of Sydney handled two cases in which victims, or their families, didn't feel they received justice.

(Some observers felt the timing of these revelations was dubious, suspecting a deliberate effort to embarrass Pell.)

As he did in the United States, Pope Benedict expressed "shame" over the crisis and vowed to pursue justice, reconciliation and healing. Also like the States, the pope held a private meeting with a small group of victims, which was not part of his official schedule and was not announced in advance. The four victims, two men and two women, met Benedict in the company of supporters and a priest assigned to pastoral outreach to victims. The pope celebrated Mass for the group and then met with each victim individually, with the entire encounter lasting roughly an hour.

Three points deserve mention.

*(1) Apology:* This is the first time a pope publicly has used the magic words, "I'm sorry," with regard to the crisis. Certainly the substance of what Benedict XVI said in the States conveyed that idea, and American media routinely referred to the pope's "apology," yet Benedict never directly said "I'm sorry."

He apparently wasn't planning on doing so in Australia either, because in the advance text of his homily for a Mass at St. Mary's Cathedral, featuring his most substantive treatment of the crisis, the words weren't there. Yet as Benedict spoke, he added the following line: "Indeed, I am deeply sorry for the pain and suffering the victims have endured, and I assure them that as their pastor, I share in their suffering."

The Vatican offered no official explanation for the addition, but the subtext seems clear enough. Aboard the papal plane, an Australian reporter asked the pope if he planned to apologize for the crisis. Benedict didn't directly respond, but laid out the core points of his approach and added that this was the substance of what the word "apologize" means. That was enough for the Australian media to launch a drumbeat of expectation for a dramatic papal apology. Later, the Vatican spokesperson, Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi, warned the press against "anticipating" what the pope might say, but by that point the train had left the station.

Since Benedict obviously is sorry for the crisis, it was natural for him to say so. Yet the last-minute tweaking of his text nonetheless also illustrates that Benedict and his retinue are growing in their sensitivity to public reaction.

*(2) Blame:* Second, Benedict XVI for the first time pointed a finger of blame for the crisis, suggesting aboard

the papal plane that "proportionalism," a moral theory in vogue in the 1960s and 70s, may have played a role. Since I devoted last week's column to this subject I won't develop it here, except to note that in a press release issued after the meeting with the pope, two of the victims (who remained unnamed) reported that Benedict told them abuse must be stopped "at the seminary training stage," perhaps an indirect confirmation that the pope believes something was amiss in moral formation.

*(3) Formula for Meeting Victims:* Benedict's meeting with victims in the United States was a novelty, so it would have been meaningless to try to spot patterns. After his second such encounter in Australia, however, one can begin to see a formula emerging for how the Vatican intends to organize such affairs. Both involved small groups, five victims in the States and four in Australia, to allow for intimacy. Both encounters took place in chapels, providing a natural spiritual frame. Both meetings have been closely guarded secrets until after the fact.

Perhaps the most striking element, however, is the decision to bypass the most visible and best-organized advocacy groups for victims. In the States, leaders of the Survivors Network of Those Abused by Priests, the highest-profile such group, were not invited to take part. They weren't consulted or informed in advance. In Australia, the local equivalent of SNAP, a group called "Broken Rites," was similarly left out of the action.

Spokespersons for these groups offer a ready explanation: the Vatican wants to deal only with docile victims in order to create the appearance of compassion, without engaging the substantive issues more critical voices would certainly raise.

Chris MacIsaac, a spokesperson for Broken Rites, put it this way: "You can always select hand-picked people who are happy with something," she said. "Nothing's ever totally wrong or totally right, but if they want to fix this, they must listen to the people who have grievance with it."

Speaking on background, church officials paint a different picture. They say they don't want these meetings to turn into a media circus, nor are they looking to launch a formal dialogue with a group or movement. Instead, they want the pope to meet with victims as individuals, particularly people who are genuinely interested in healing and reconciliation. This is designed as a pastoral exercise, they say, not a PR stunt or a policy debate.

In any event, the choice seems clear enough. Time will tell if bypassing the best-known advocates for victims will backfire, or if it will succeed in steering the conversation in a less adversarial direction.

## **The Environment**

Although the point didn't get much traction amid the pageantry of World Youth Day, it's a striking fact that the most frequent social or cultural concern cited by Pope Benedict XVI in Australia was the environment. The pope talked about ecological themes seven times:

- His message for the people of Australia and the pilgrims at World Youth Day in advance of the trip;

- Aboard the papal plane, in response to a question about climate change;
- His speech at Sydney's Government House for his official welcome;
- Comments for his arrival at World Youth Day in Barangaroo, a former wharf in Sydney;
- A visit to disadvantaged youth served by the "Alive" program;
- An inter-faith session in Sydney's Cathedral of St. Mary;
- The homily for the final Mass of World Youth Day.

I'm preparing an *NCR* cover story on the growth of ecological consciousness in Catholicism, so I won't belabor the point here. Instead, I'll offer a sample of what the pope had to say. This passage is drawn from the pope's remarks at Barangaroo, a former wharf area of Sydney where Benedict made his formal arrival:

"Perhaps reluctantly, we come to acknowledge that there are also scars which mark the surface of our earth: erosion, deforestation, the squandering of the world's mineral and ocean resources in order to fuel an insatiable consumption," Benedict said. "Some of you come from island nations whose very existence is threatened by rising water levels; others from nations suffering the effects of devastating drought."

"God's wondrous creation is sometimes experienced as almost hostile to its stewards, even something dangerous," the pope said. "How can what is 'good' appear so threatening?"

If there was a distinctive twist to what the pope said in Australia, it was the need for reconfiguration of lifestyles, beyond and beneath policy questions. Repeatedly, Benedict warned against what he called the "folly of the consumerist mindset."

One sign that somebody was paying attention: the Acton Institute, a Grand Rapids-based think tank with a pro-free market message, put out a press release rejecting impressions that the pope has "gone green" in the secular sense. Benedict wasn't warning against a climate crisis, the Acton release stated, but a moral crisis.

### **World Youth Day as 'Evangelical Pilgrimage'**

In remarks at the concluding Mass thanking Benedict XVI, Pell said that World Youth Day acts as an antidote to images of Catholicism as in decline or wracked by controversy. "It shows the church as it really is," Pell said, "alive with evangelical energy."

That line might serve as a motto for World Youth Day's emergence as an "Evangelical Pilgrimage," clearly in evidence during the Sydney edition. I wrote an essay on this topic during the event, which can be found here: <http://ncrcafe.org/node/2003> [1]

In summary form, World Youth Day is generally called a "pilgrimage," and the first few instances were indeed pilgrimages in the classic sense, held at traditional destinations such as Santiago de Compostela in Spain and the famed Polish shrine of the Black Madonna in Czestochowa.

Along the way, however, huge turnout and youthful energy made World Youth Day into a "happening" in the

secular sense, garnering press interest and capturing the popular imagination. Church officials began to grasp that the value of a World Youth Day lies not only in its impact upon the young people who take part, but upon the broader culture. In short, they grasped that World Youth Day has enormous evangelical potential to rouse the secular world.

Today, the primary question in deciding where to stage the event is no longer which site World Youth Day most needs, but rather which site most needs a World Youth Day. Australia's reputation as an ultra-secular society distant from the traditional centers of the faith made it a natural case in point.

The announcement that the next edition, in 2011, will be held in Madrid also fits the pattern. Not only is Western Europe the only place on earth where secularism is truly part of what sociologists call the basic cultural "package," but under the Socialist government of Prime Minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, Spain has also witnessed fierce church/state clashes. The Spanish church has been searching for ways to assert itself, and no doubt a World Youth Day will be an emphatic way of sending the message that "we're still here."

### **A Splash of Tradition**

Popes influence the liturgical life of the church, meaning how Catholics celebrate the Mass and the other rituals of the faith, in two primary ways. One is through the rules issued by the Vatican, the other through their own example. The former is coercive, while the latter is more indirect and, one might say, hortatory. Sometimes, their own liturgical practice allows popes to nudge the church's worship in a given direction, even if they're not prepared to make it binding.

Benedict may have offered one such nudge in Sydney, through the way in which he distributed communion.

Both at the pope's Saturday Mass at the Cathedral of St. Mary's, and the final World Youth Day Mass on Sunday at Randwick Racecourse, those who received communion directly from Benedict did so on the tongue, while kneeling. That posture was the norm in the years before the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), but in the decades since it has become more common for Catholics to receive communion standing, often in the hand.

That transition has been controversial in some quarters, with critics suggesting it diminishes reverence for the Eucharist. Others, however, say communion in the hand was widely practiced in the early church - an instance, they say, of Vatican II recovering a custom from tradition rather than inventing something new. (St. Cyril of Jerusalem, for example, in the fourth century counseled the faithful to make a throne of their hands in order to receive the king in communion.)

Benedict's use of a kneeler and distribution of communion on the tongue made a stir last May during a Mass in Rome for Corpus Christi, the feast of the Body of Christ. At the time, Vatican officials said it was not a permanent change in papal liturgies, but rather was intended to highlight the importance of Corpus Christi, which is focused precisely on the Eucharist. They also insisted that there is "no discussion" about issuing new norms to make distribution of communion on the tongue, or from a kneeling position, mandatory.

Benedict is famously something of a liturgical traditionalist, whose approach so far has been to give neglected traditions a new lease on life by making them optional, rather than imposing them through force of law. The most prominent example has been his *motu proprio* authorizing wider celebration of the old Latin Mass, while keeping the reformed Mass in the vernacular languages as the "normative" mode of worship.

In that spirit, Benedict's decision to distribute communion as he did in Sydney may have been intended to reinforce his verbal invitations to deepen Eucharistic devotion. By extension, the pope may be inviting local congregations around the world to ponder whether there might be analogous occasions when a similar dash of tradition might be warranted in their own setting.

By the way, the pope may have veered in a classical direction regarding communion in Sydney, but on several other points, dyed-in-the-wool traditionalists were clearly disappointed. For example, during the closing Mass, a group of scantily clad Fiji islanders performed a native dance as part of the procession with the Book of the Gospels, derided by one critic as "inculturation run amuck." Close observers also noted that during the Eucharistic Prayer, Benedict XVI followed the currently authorized rendering of the Latin phrase *pro multis* as "for all," despite the fact that in October 2006 the Vatican directed English-speaking bishops' conferences to adopt the translation "for many." For some critics, this was an example of the pope placing collegiality, meaning a desire to await the formal action of bishops' conferences, above fidelity.

For the record, the hundreds of priests who fanned out at Randwick Racecourse to deliver communion on Sunday generally distributed the hosts in the hand to people who were standing up - which means the vast majority of people at the papal Mass received communion in what one might loosely call the "post-Vatican II" style. This blend of the old and the new, emphasizing, perhaps, the continuity of Vatican II with what went before, could be seen as a distinctively "Benedictine" touch.

The e-mail address for John L. Allen Jr. is [jallen@ncronline.org](mailto:jallen@ncronline.org)[2]

---

**Source URL (retrieved on 07/25/2017 - 14:34):** <https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/all-things-catholic/four-sfumature-popes-trip-sydney>

**Links:**

[1] <http://ncrcafe.org/node/2003>

[2] <mailto:jallen@ncronline.org>