

This trip may be pope's last chance to see the land of the Bible

John L. Allen Jr. | Apr. 17, 2009 All Things Catholic

Pope Benedict XVI turned 82 on Thursday, and on Sunday he'll mark the fourth anniversary of his election to the papacy -- in American argot, what we might call the end of his first term. Media outlets have prepared analyses to mark the occasion, most of which collect predictable commentary from the usual suspects (my own sound-bites very much included.)

Here's one striking wrinkle, however, by way of a "dog that didn't bark" dynamic: Despite the fact that Benedict XVI is now 82 years old, there's been virtually no drumbeat this week about papal succession. By the time John Paul II turned 82 in May 2002, speculation about what might come next was very much in the air, fueled by the pope's visible decline.

The absence of talk about the papal horserace is probably the best measure of Benedict's essentially robust health. The buzz in Rome is that we could be looking at another Leo XIII, who died in 1903 at the age of 93.

Of course, God alone knows what the future holds, but for now it's full steam ahead. In fact, Benedict XVI is approaching what is likely to be not only a defining moment of his pontificate, but also one of the most important news stories of 2009, and not just on the religion beat: his May 8-15 trip to Jordan, Israel, and the Palestinian Territories.

In the run-up, comparisons inevitably will be drawn with John Paul II's dramatic March 2000 voyage to the Holy Land, when the Polish pope, who grew up in the shadow of Auschwitz, stood at the Western Wall in Jerusalem and left behind a handwritten note apologizing for Christian anti-Semitism. Benedict XVI's visit may or may not feature a similar iconic image, but at the level of substance, there's arguably even more at stake this time around. (This despite the fact that organizers have taken great pains to emphasize the trip is not "political," and to frame it primarily as a spiritual pilgrimage for an 82-year-old pontiff who will probably never have another chance to visit the land of the Bible.)

The following are five storylines destined to run through the trip, illustrating why it's worth getting a head start on pondering its prospects.

Catholic/Jewish relations

Ties between Catholicism and Judaism were badly frayed by the recent fiasco involving the lifting of the excommunications of four traditionalist Catholic bishops, including one who is a Holocaust-denier. The Vatican has repeatedly insisted that the gesture did not signal a rollback in relations, but many Jews still have their doubts -- especially because it came hard on the heels of a similar eruption in 2007, when Benedict XVI authorized wider celebration of the old Latin liturgy that includes a controversial Good Friday prayer for the conversion of Jews. (The latest irritant on that front came just last week. The German chapter of the traditionalist Society of St. Pius X, to which the four reinstated bishops belong, insisted upon praying the classic version of the Good Friday prayer, which refers to the "blindness" of the Jews, and not the version issued by Benedict XVI in February 2008 that removed much of the contested language.)

Also lurking in the background are on-going disputes over the memory of Pius XII, the wartime pope sometimes accused of "silence" during the Holocaust, as well as over the tax and juridical status of church properties in Israel. The Vatican formally recognized Israel in 1993, with assurances that side agreements on these matters would follow. More than fifteen years later, the two sides have yet to nail down a deal.

More broadly, Catholic/Jewish relations today stand at a crossroads. The pioneers of dialogue on the Catholic side, many of whom felt a personal commitment to improving ties with Judaism because of their memories of the Holocaust, are passing from the scene. Leadership in Catholicism is increasingly coming from Africa, Latin America and Asia, where Judaism is not generally a significant demographic presence. Moreover, Catholics in the global south often don't have the same sense of historical responsibility for the Holocaust as Europeans, which they tend to see in terms of Western, rather than Christian, guilt. While these leaders recognize the Biblical roots of the Christian/Jewish relationship, they often don't feel the same biographical commitment to it, nor do they have the same experience of regular interaction and personal friendships with Jews.

As a result, there's a risk of drift in Catholic/Jewish dialogue, especially as other relationships – Islam above all – come to loom larger in the Catholic mind. Benedict XVI thus faces the challenge of laying an enduring foundation for the relationship, and of persuading Jews around the world that the Catholic church is serious about it.

At this level, probably the most-watched moment of the trip will come on May 11, when Benedict XVI visits the renowned Holocaust memorial at Yad Vashem in Jerusalem. In what many will see as a reminder of the tensions that plague the relationship, the pope will not enter the museum at Yad Vashem, which contains a placard critical of Pius XII to which the Vatican has long objected.

Catholic/Muslim relations

When Benedict XVI lands in Jordan on May 8, it will be his first visit to an Arab nation and his first to a predominantly Muslim country since Turkey in late November/early December 2006. As it turned out, the Turkey trip became a kiss-and-make-up exercise in the wake of the pope's famous September 2006 speech in Regensburg, Germany, which inflamed sentiment across the Muslim world because of its incendiary citation of a 14th century Byzantine emperor with some nasty things to say about Muhammad, the founder of Islam. The iconic image from Turkey was Benedict XVI standing inside the Blue Mosque, shoulder-to-shoulder with the Grand Mufti of Istanbul, for a moment of silent prayer in the direction of Mecca.

Because the Turkey trip was hijacked by damage control, Jordan offers Benedict his first real opportunity to lay out his vision of Catholic/Muslim relations while on Islamic turf. That vision goes under the heading of "inter-cultural dialogue," and it boils down to this: Benedict XVI believes the real clash of civilizations in the world today runs not between Islam and the West, but between belief and unbelief. In that struggle, he believes Christians and Muslims should be natural allies. As a result, he has deemphasized the fine points of theological exchange – how Christians and Muslims each understand atonement, for example, or scripture. Instead, his priority is a grand partnership with Muslims in defense of a robust role for religion in public affairs, as well as shared values such as the family and the sanctity of life. (Among other things, that means joint efforts against abortion and gay marriage.)

The price of admission to that partnership, Benedict believes, is for Islam to denounce violence and to accept the legitimacy of religious freedom. In that sense, he sees himself as a friend of Islam, promoting reform from within a shared space of religious and moral commitment. To date, however, he has not found an argot for making that pitch successfully to the Muslim "street."

The Jordan leg of the trip may well be the pope's best opportunity to get it right, especially because Jordanian

Muslims have tried hard to meet the pope halfway, seeing themselves as natural leaders of Islam's moderate majority. In the wake of the Regensburg contretemps, it was Jordan's Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought that took the lead in organizing Islamic scholars to respond and to foster new Muslim/Catholic dialogue. If Benedict can't connect here, it's an open question what chance he stands anywhere else.

Certainly the pope's schedule reflects a desire to reach out. On May 9, he'll meet with a delegation of Muslim leaders at the Al-Hussein bin-Talal Mosque, the largest mosque in Jordan. On May 11 he addresses an inter-religious assembly in Jerusalem that will include Muslims, and the next day he will become the first pope ever to visit the Dome of the Rock, the oldest extant Islamic building in the world, believed by Muslims to mark the spot from which Muhammad ascended to Heaven alongside the angel Gabriel.

Indeed, the very fact that Benedict XVI has elected to spend three full days in Jordan before moving on to Israel has been presented as a sign of his interest in deepening ties with Muslims, and with the Arab world. In 2000, John Paul II devoted only 24 hours of his seven-day itinerary to Jordan.

Exodus of Christians from the Holy Land

Though Europe may be the cradle of Christendom, the Holy Land is where it all began. At a psychological and spiritual level, it's impossible to overstate the significance of holy places such as Jerusalem, Bethlehem and Nazareth for the Christian imagination. Moreover, the presence of Christian communities in those locations creates a natural bridge among the three great monotheistic religions. Especially for Christian/Muslim relations, having a group of Christians who speak Arabic and who know the situation on the ground is invaluable.

Those realities make the present "exodus" of Christians out of the Holy Land a source of deep angst for the pope and other Christian leaders. The numbers are stark: In 1948, at the time of the partition, Christians amounted to 15-20 percent of the population in what was to become Israel and the Palestinian Territories. Today, the Christians are estimated at less than 2 percent. There are more Palestinian Christians living in émigré communities in Europe, Canada, the United States and Australia than in Palestine itself.

Like everything else in the Middle East, who's responsible for this exodus is a matter of debate. Palestinians tend to blame the Israeli occupation, while Israelis and American conservatives often fault a rising tide of Islamic fundamentalism. Others say the plain fact is that given the political and economic paralysis of the region, anybody who has a chance is likely to at least consider fleeing, and Palestinian Christians often have access to overseas networks of support that make it easier to relocate. Whatever the case, a growing number of analysts warn ominously that Christianity faces the prospect of "extinction" in the land of its birth.

It's not clear how much Benedict XVI, or any Christian leader, can do to arrest this trend. Local Jews and Muslims both have clear demographic strategies for bolstering their presence: Israel encourages *aliyah*, meaning Jewish immigration to the country, while Yasser Arafat once famously said that his most potent weapon is "the womb of the Arab woman." There's no similar push for Christians to beef up their numbers, suggesting that at least in the short run, the decline may be irreversible.

What Benedict XVI may be able to accomplish, however, is to galvanize Christians around the world to support the struggling Christian communities of the Holy Land financially, politically, and spiritually. Concretely, he could encourage pilgrimage to the Holy Land as an act of Christian solidarity.

Benedict's stop in Jordan should also afford him the opportunity to address another group of embattled Christians, from another Middle Eastern hot spot: Iraqi Christians, tens of thousands of whom have taken refuge in the country. (Some estimates put the number of Iraqi refugees currently in Jordan as high as one million, representing 18 percent of the overall population. Christians are over-represented among the refugees, which ironically makes Jordan the one country in the Arab world where the Christian share of the population has

actually gone up.) A logical moment for the pope to meet Iraqis, and to address Iraq's future, may come on May 10, when he's scheduled to bless the first stone of a new Catholic church at Bethany beyond the Jordan (known in Arabic as Wadi al Kharran), which Christian tradition regards as the site where Jesus was baptized by John. The Wadi al Kharran stop will also be significant for a different reason: officials in Jordan want it to become a new "capital" of Christian-Muslim dialogue.

The Vatican and the Israeli/Palestinian Conflict

Catholicism is unique among world religions in that it has its own diplomatic corps, and aspires to act as a voice of conscience in global affairs. Beyond that humanitarian logic for engaging in the peace process, the Vatican also feels a direct stake in the outcome, seeing it as key to preserving what's left of the Christian presence in the Holy Land.

Benedict will have a chance to see the human face of the conflict up close, visiting a Caritas-operated hospital for infants on May 13, as well as the fifty-year-old Aida Camp, with a population of more than 3,000 long-term refugees.

On that level, perhaps the key difference between the visits of John Paul II and Benedict XVI is that back in the spring of 2000, the prospects for peace seemed far brighter. When John Paul touched down in March, preparations were already underway for the Camp David Summit in July, when Arafat and then-Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barack walked up to the brink of a deal. Benedict, meanwhile, arrives on the other side of Israel's conflict with Hamas in Gaza, as well as the election of a new government in Israel whose foreign minister who has cast doubt on the very idea of a two-state solution.

Further complicating Benedict's peace-making effort is the Vatican's reputation among many Israelis as less than a fair broker. Officially, the Holy See is even-handed: it supports the right of both Israelis and Palestinians to sovereignty and security, and calls for an "internationally guaranteed special status" for the holy places that does not prejudice the question of whether Jerusalem should be the capital of Israel, a Palestinian state, or both.

In reality, however, the Vatican has long been sort of a mirror image of American Evangelicals: A Christian force in the West that, for reasons both theological and political, takes a keen interest in the Middle East, only in this case tending to favor the Palestinians rather than the Israelis. (One small but telling symbol of where the Vatican's heart lies is that an ivory set of the Stations of the Cross, which currently adorn the chapel of the Synod Hall, were a gift to John Paul II from Arafat.)

This pro-Palestinian tilt is informed by a variety of factors, but probably none so decisive as the simple fact that the Christians on the ground, from whom the Vatican often takes its cues, are mostly Palestinians. If Christianity is to have a future in the Holy Land, its center of gravity will inevitably be in a Palestinian state.

Perceptions of pro-Palestinian bias have long been a sore point in Vatican/Israeli relations, most recently when a senior Vatican official compared the Israeli presence in the Gaza Strip to a "giant concentration camp." That was hardly unprecedented: In the spring of 2002, Israel repeatedly protested *L'Osservatore Romano's* insistence on referring to a standoff at the Basilica of the Nativity in Bethlehem as an Israeli "siege," even though it began when Palestinian gunmen stormed the church. In July 2005, when Israel complained that Benedict XVI had not included an Israeli town on a list of places hit by recent terror attacks, a Vatican spokesperson testily replied that the pope was reluctant to denounce such attacks for fear of legitimizing disproportionate military responses from Israel that violate international law.

Just in the last few days, Israelis objected that the Vatican has chosen to participate in the U.N.'s "World Conference Against Racism" in Geneva April 20-24, rather than joining the United States, Canada, Italy, and other nations in distancing themselves from the event (also known as the "Durban Review Conference") on the

grounds that it equates Zionism with racism, and singles out Israel for blame.

If the Catholic church wishes to serve as a catalyst for peace, its leadership obviously must convince both Israelis and Palestinians of their impartiality. Benedict thus has to walk a tightrope: Reassuring Israelis that he's sympathetic to them, despite the history sketched above, while not creating alarm among Palestinians that the Vatican is abandoning their cause.

The Vatican, American Catholics, and Obama

This week's big Vatican story was its denial of reports circulated in the Italian and American press that several Obama nominees as ambassador to the Holy See have been rejected, including Caroline Kennedy, on the basis of their pro-choice politics. One senior Vatican diplomat testily told me on Monday that these reports are "all lies," fueled by a penchant among some Italian journalists for penning *romanzi*, meaning novels, rather than facts.

This attempt to downplay conflict with the White House is symptomatic of a clear difference in tone between the Vatican and conservative Catholic circles in the States vis-à-vis Obama. While the Vatican yields pride of place to no one in its pro-life commitment, it also has other interests where it senses the potential for a meeting of minds with the new American administration, including poverty relief, multilateralism in foreign policy, arms control and conflict resolution.

In particular, the Vatican likes what it's heard so far from the Obama team on the Israeli/Palestinian problem. Another senior Vatican diplomat told me this week that the Holy See has been "encouraged" by Obama's reiteration of support for a two-state solution, and by his desire to reach out to Iran. (Given that Iran is a major backer of Hamas, the Vatican, like many international observers, believes the Iranians must be part of a resolution.)

Benedict's trip to the Holy Land thus represents the first opportunity to "road test" the prospects for collaboration between the United States and the Vatican with regard to a critical shared objective "peace in the Middle East. That's an especially live prospect given the likelihood that Benedict and Obama will meet in person shortly afterwards, on the occasion of the G-8 summit in Italy in July.

This storyline may be particularly beguiling in view of a notable coincidence: Benedict's trip to the Holy Land wraps up on May 15, just two days before Obama's much-ballyhooed May 17 commencement address at the University of Notre Dame.

John L. Allen Jr. will be travelling on the papal plane to cover Benedict XVI's May 8-15 visit to Jordan, Israel and the Palestinian Territories.

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