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Can Benedict change the Middle East equation?

by NCR Staff



Israeli laborers assemble a grandstand May 5 in preparation for a May 14 Mass to be celebrated by Pope Benedict XVI on Mount Precipice in Nazareth. (CNS/Reuters)

Editorial

At the level of pious rhetoric, the Vatican's vision for the Holy Land is clear and compelling: A land of two states and three faiths, where Jews, Muslims and Christians live in peace and mutual respect.

That dream, of course, is hardly the reality of the Middle East, suggesting that Pope Benedict XVI's May 8-15 visit to Jordan, Israel and the Palestinian territories may well be the single most important week of his entire papacy.

The \$64,000 question is whether this occasionally PR-challenged pontiff, known more for his grasp of insider Catholic baseball than geopolitics or interfaith sensitivity, can wield the bully pulpit of the papacy in a way that changes the equation on the ground.

The stakes have rarely been higher. Consider the issues awaiting Benedict:

- The fate of Catholic-Jewish relations in the wake of the fiasco involving the rehabilitation of a Holocaust-denying bishop;

- Catholic-Muslim ties awaiting a stimulus from Benedict's first visit to an Arab nation;
- The ongoing exodus of Christians out of the Holy Land;
- The future of the peace process in the face of conflict in Gaza, divisions within the Palestinian leadership, and a new Israeli government skeptical of the very idea of a two-state solution.

However imposing that all may seem, it's worth remembering that Benedict XVI can summon a deft touch when he wants to. His trips to Turkey and to the United States were both rich and successful in papal symbolism, projecting reconciliation, understanding and hope.

The last time a pope came to the Middle East, hope was much more in the air. John Paul II arrived in March 2000 in the wake of the 1998 Wye River accords and just ahead of the Camp David Summit -- when Yasser Arafat and then-Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak came tantalizing close to a deal. Then, of course, the second intifada exploded, and the region settled into another cycle of tragedy.

Perhaps this time Benedict can reverse the formula. He arrives in a moment of despair, but if the pope can tap the resources of both the Catholic church and the international community to make a serious push for the two-state solution, maybe victory can be snatched from the jaws of defeat.

Sometime soon, Benedict is expected to issue a new encyclical on Catholic social teaching. There would be no better way to frame that letter than by showing what the church's social doctrine can do when applied with courage and imagination to the most cancerous conflict in the world.

Editor's note: NCR's coverage of Pope Benedict's May 8-15 trip to the Middle East begins tomorrow with reports from senior correspondent John L. Allen Jr., who will be traveling with the pope. Watch NCRonline.org for daily postings.

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