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Emphasis on Islam makes pope's trip an original

by John L. Allen Jr.



Pope Benedict XVI, standing next to Jordan's King Abdullah II, center, is greeted by a Muslim sheikh upon his arrival at Queen Alia International Airport in Amman, Jordan, May 8. (CNS/Reuters)

Amman, Jordan

From the outside, it might be tempting to see Pope Benedict XVI's trip to the Holy Land this week as a replay of John Paul II's celebrated March 2000 performance, only with a less charismatic pontiff in the starring role. The fact that Benedict has chosen to start by spending three full days in Jordan, however, offers a clue that something is clearly different.

Benedict landed in Amman this afternoon, opening his keenly anticipated May 8-15 swing through Jordan, Israel and the Palestinian Territories.

Nine years ago, John Paul spent only 24 hours in Jordan. As it happens, Jordan is the first Arab country Benedict has visited, and his comparatively lengthy stay points to an important insight: Islam looms far larger today than the last time a pope came to the Holy Land.

Two epochal events have combined to propel Islam to the forefront of Catholic consciousness. In short-hand fashion, one might call them 9/11 and 9/12.

The first refers to the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, and the terrifying prospect of a global conflict between Islam and the West they seemed to herald. The second evokes Benedict XVI's famous speech at the University of Regensburg, delivered on Sept. 12, 2006. On that occasion, Benedict cited a Byzantine emperor to the effect that Muhammad, the founder of Islam, brought "things only evil and inhuman, such as the command to spread by the sword the faith he preached." The speech set off a firestorm which had the paradoxical effect of both disrupting, and yet also energizing, Catholic-Muslim relations.

Benedict's trip, therefore, isn't a photocopy. It's an original, the first papal voyage to the Holy Land in which attention to Islam doesn't take a back burner to other priorities, above all the relationship with Judaism.

The pope struck a note of Christian-Muslim harmony immediately this afternoon, expressing "deep respect for the Muslim community" during a brief welcoming ceremony at Amman's Queen Alia International Airport.

In a break with protocol, Jordan's King Abdullah II drove out to the airport to personally welcome the pontiff. In another gesture of deference, Abdullah II delivered his remarks in English, but provided translations in both Italian and Latin, a rarity on papal travels.

Benedict XVI is the third modern pope to visit Jordan, the first being Paul VI in 1964. The Vatican has long looked to Jordan as a model of Christian-Muslim coexistence, in part because the country's Hashemite monarchy, which claims direct descent from Muhammad, sees itself as a natural leader of Islam's center. Jordan is also perhaps the most reliable U.S. ally in the Middle East.

Benedict also owes the Jordanians a particular debt of gratitude, since it was the Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought in Amman that spearheaded a positive 2006 response from 38 Islamic scholars after the Regensburg speech, and followed that up with an open letter in 2007 titled "A Common Word," this one signed by 138 Muslim leaders. Both gestures are credited with getting Muslim-Christian relations back on track in the wake of Regensburg.

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Today, Benedict tipped his cap to his hosts.

"The opportunity that Jordan's Catholic community enjoys to build public places of worship is a sign of this country's respect for religion," Benedict told Abdullah. "I want to say how much this openness is appreciated."

Referring to Jordan's efforts at inter-faith dialogue, Benedict said they promote "an alliance of civilizations between the West and the Muslim world, confounding the predictions of those who consider violence and conflict inevitable."

Abdullah II himself is a Western-educated figure, who among other things has studied at a Catholic university. In 1987, he was a mid-career fellow at Georgetown's Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service, and in 2005 Georgetown awarded him an honorary doctorate.

In his welcome, Abdullah told Benedict that Muslims and Christians must join forces against "voices of provocation:" and "ambitious ideologies of division" that "threaten unspeakable suffering."

Jordanian Catholic Rateb Rabie, who today heads the U.S.-based Holy Land Ecumenical Foundation, said that his native country walks its talk.

"It really is a moderate country," Rabie said. "They're not just trying to show that image to the world, but it's who they are."

Other local observers, however, caution against an overly idyllic view. Jesuit Fr. Kevin O'Connell, a Bostonian who's been in Jordan for 13 years as pastor of Amman's English-speaking parish, describes Catholic-Muslim relations as "OK" rather than "stunning."

"It's true that Jordan works very hard to be a place where Muslims and Christians can live with one another, understand each other and respect each other," O'Connell said. "No one feels unsafe going to church, or being identified as a Christian, which is very different from some other countries in the region."

Nonetheless, O'Connell said, there are some "neuralgic" issues -- above all, conversion and intermarriage. Both are tied up with Jordan's Islamic identity; any Muslim who wishes to convert to another religion is subject to various forms of official and unofficial persecution, and intermarriage is difficult, especially if a non-Muslim man wants to marry a Muslim woman (since religious affiliation is believed to come from the father.)

O'Connell said that he's worked with a handful of converts ? most of whom, he said, eventually decide to leave the country, in some cases requesting asylum on the grounds of religious persecution.

"This has to be grappled with," he said.

If today's exchange between pope and king represented the most senior level of Catholic-Muslim relations, Benedict's visit later this afternoon to Regina Pacis, a church-run center for mentally and physically disabled youth, illustrated the ties at the grassroots.

Christians are less than three percent of the population in Jordan, which among other things means that most of those served by the Regina Pacis center are Muslims, as are many of the staff members (though the center is run by three Comboni sisters.) Regina Pacis offers both medical services and courses of formation, so that disabled youth can eventually hold jobs and manage relationships in the wider society.

Benedict told his mixed Muslim-Christian crowd at the center that he does not come "bearing gifts or offerings," but rather with "an intention, a hope: to pray for the precious gift of unity and peace, most specifically for the Middle East."

Earlier in the day, aboard the papal plane, Benedict told reporters that he hopes to make a contribution to peace in the Middle East ? not as a "political party," but through prayer, the formation of conscience, and an emphasis on reason.

Benedict emphasized the shared spiritual heritage among Jews, Muslims and Christians, though he conceded that misunderstandings from time to time are probably inevitable. Speaking specifically of Christianity and Judaism, the pope added a typically professorial flourish -- saying that after 2,000 years apart, each faith now has its own "semantic cosmos."

"We have to learn to speak one another's language," Benedict said.

For a pope who has had occasional difficulties doing precisely that, the admission seemed to signal a determination this time around to stay "on message." Clearly, a large part of that message is telling his Muslim hosts that he's serious about détente.

John L. Allen Jr. is *NCR* senior correspondent. His traveling with Pope Benedict XVI in Jordan, Israel and the Palestinian Territories May 8-15. Read NCRonline.org daily for his dispatches from the Holy Land.

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