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Today, Benedict belonged to the Palestinians

John L. Allen Jr. | May. 13, 2009

Palestinian girls smile next to a papal flag as Pope Benedict celebrates Mass in Bethlehem (CNS photo)

Bethlehem, Palestinian Territories

After a rough forty-eight hours for Pope Benedict XVI in the Middle East, the pontiff attempted to get back on track today with his most explicitly political message. On his lone day in the Palestinian Territories, Benedict delivered the papal equivalent of Ronald Reagan?s famous 1987 ?tear down this wall!? speech in Berlin.

Standing in a Palestinian refugee camp located in the shadow of Israel?s towering security wall, Benedict forcefully criticized such barriers between peoples.

?In a world where more and more borders are being opened up ? to trade, to travel, to movement of peoples, to cultural exchanges ? it is tragic to see walls still being erected,? the pope said.

Later, he said such walls ?do not last forever? and ?can be taken down? ? a fairly clear hint that, in his mind, the wall should come down as quickly as possible.

To be sure, Benedict balanced those statements by urging Palestinian youth to resist the lure of terrorism ? an indirect acknowledgment of the security concerns which led Israel to erect the wall in the first place.

For the most part, however, today the pope belonged to the Palestinians. He once again endorsed Palestinian statehood, referred to the suffering in the Gaza Strip five times, and compared the fate of Palestinian refugees with the Holy Family?s flight to Egypt.

Benedict crossed from Israel into the West Bank early this morning. Geographically it was a journey of just four miles, but one that carried the pontiff across a vast political and cultural gulf.

Benedict wasted no time returning to the theme of the two-state solution, which he first endorsed on Monday upon his arrival at Tel Aviv in Israel. This time, his language was even sharper.

?The Holy See supports the right of your people to a sovereign Palestinian homeland in the land of your forefathers, secure and at peace with its neighbors, within internationally recognized borders,? the pope said.

Later in the day, Benedict used the magic word ?state.? During a visit to the Aida camp, home to some 3,000 Palestinian refugees which was opened after the 19478 Arab/Israeli war, Benedict told his audience, ?Your legitimate aspirations for permanent homes, for an independent Palestinian State, remain unfulfilled.?

Throughout the day, the pope exuded sympathy for the plight of Palestinians hard-hit by decades of war, political paralysis, and economic stagnation. He recognized their ?natural right to marry, to raise families, and to have access to work, education and health care.?

?I know how much you have suffered and continue to suffer as a result of the turmoil that has afflicted this land for decades,? the pope said during the welcoming ceremony, urging Palestinians to ?keep alive the flame of hope.?

In this context, Benedict pled with young Palestinians to reject terrorism.

?I make this appeal to the many young people throughout the Palestinian Territories today: do not allow the loss of life and the destruction that you have witnessed to arouse bitterness or resentment in your hearts,? he said. ?Have the courage to resist any temptation you may feel to resort to acts of violence or terrorism.?

Given the resentments that lurk barely beneath the surface, however, the pope?s appeal may be a tough sell. In Bethlehem?s City Hall building, just off Manger Square where Benedict celebrated Mass, posters dotted the wall showing four Palestinian men from the area who had been killed by Israeli troops, with two of the men brandishing automatic weapons. One of the four was the local leader of the Islamic Jihad movement.

The poster reads, ?Our four martyrs.?

Perhaps the day?s most dramatic moment came with Benedict?s visit to the Aida camp, which was one of the hardest hit areas of the West Bank by an Israeli incursion in 2002, intended to curb terrorism.

The visit gave the pontiff the chance to encounter young Palestinians such as Sofia Ramadan, a Muslim and part of a youth group that danced for Benedict. Ramadan grew up in the Aida camp, and said the construction of the nearby security wall destroyed a grove of olive trees where the students at the camp?s school used to play.

Ramadan said she wants to be a journalist, ?so I can tell the world what?s happening here in Palestine.?

Early indications are that Benedict?s words and gestures today are likely to be well received by Palestinian spokespersons.

?I hope [the pope?s message] will reach the ears of all Palestinians, so people today will not feel alone, will not feel abandoned, will not feel scared, will not feel hopeless,? said Saeb Erakat, a chief Palestinian negotiator, speaking on CNN.

?I am not saying that the pope will turn the train tomorrow and change things, but this is a step, a huge step in the right direction,? Erakat said.

During his open-air Mass in Manger Square, the pope also addressed a word to the rapidly diminishing Christian population in the Palestinian Territories.

?Count on the prayers and solidarity of your brothers and sisters in the universal Church, and work, with concrete initiatives, to consolidate your presence and to offer new possibilities to those tempted to leave,? the pope said.

Tomorrow, Benedict will travel to Nazareth in the Galilee region of Israel, where among other things he is scheduled to meet Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, the two men?s first substantive encounter during the trip.

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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