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## Benedict's 'affirmative orthodoxy a model of engagement

by NCR Editorial Staff

During Pope Benedict XVI's Sept. 26-28 trip to the Czech Republic, a spider that crawled across the pope's garments probably got more play in the American press than anything the pope actually said or did. That's a pity, because Benedict's relentlessly positive tone on the trip set an important example for how the church can successfully engage cultures, and political leaders, with which it has serious disagreements.

The stage seemed set for an exercise in papal finger-wagging. The Czech Republic is arguably one of the most post-Christian societies on earth, a place where a solid majority of the population professes to be atheist. It's also embraced a Dutch-style ethos of tolerance: Abortion is legal, cheap and common; a domestic partnership law for gay couples was adopted in 2006; and the country's parliament is currently contemplating a bill to legalize euthanasia.

There are also serious problems in church-state relations, including the fate of some \$8 billion in church property stolen under the communists and never returned.

Remarkably, Benedict spent a full three days in the Czech Republic without ever once mentioning any of those flash points. Indeed, his top lieutenant even told the country's interim prime minister that as far as the Vatican is concerned, resolution of the property dispute and passage of a new church-state treaty is not an "urgent" priority.

Instead, the pontiff's message was pitched on a far loftier level. Benedict repeatedly meditated on the subject of freedom, congratulating the peoples of the former Soviet sphere for winning back their liberty from the Soviets two decades ago, but inviting them to ponder what that freedom is for. Having set the table, he left it to his Czech hosts to draw the appropriate conclusions.

That choice flows from Benedict's fundamental conviction about how Catholicism ought to engage the

secular world, a choice sometimes termed "affirmative orthodoxy." In effect, he believes that secularists are operating out of a caricature of Christianity, seeing it mostly as a system of rules and restrictions. The only way to break through that perception, the pope believes, is to focus not so much on what the church is against, but rather what it's for; not what causes the church to say "no," but rather its far more fundamental "yes" to authentic human happiness and flourishing.

Benedict laid out the logic for "affirmative orthodoxy" three years ago, after a trip to Spain: "Christianity, Catholicism, isn't a collection of prohibitions. It's a positive option. It's very important that we look at it again, because this idea has almost completely disappeared today. We've heard so much about what is not allowed that now it's time to say: We have a positive idea to offer. [Everything] is clearer if you say it first in a positive way."

That philosophy obviously has applications well beyond the occasional papal outing to secular parts of Europe.

Just as Benedict did in the Czech Republic, Catholic leaders in America have to ask themselves: What's the best way to engage that secular thrust in American culture -- by attacking it, with the risk of becoming locked in a cycle of recrimination and partisan division, or stepping back from it a bit, and helping people to take a new look at Christianity by focusing on its fundamentally positive vision?

Anyone looking at the recent track record of how Catholicism in America engages with public life, perhaps especially with politics, might draw the conclusion that a splash of affirmative orthodoxy could go a long way here too.

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