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Malta president upstages pope on crisis

by John L. Allen Jr.

NCR Today

Valletta, Malta -- Heading into Pope Benedict XVI's weekend trip to Malta, the \$64,000 question for the global media was whether, and how, the pontiff would address the sexual abuse crisis facing the Catholic church, both here in Malta and around the world.

So far, however, the most incisive words on the crisis have come not from the pope but rather from his official host, Maltese President George Abela -- a prominent Catholic lawyer who has also worked over the years for church courts on marriage issues.

In effect, Abela defended the church but also called for more "transparent" and "efficient" procedures to combat cases of abuse.

"It would be wrong in my view to try to use the reprehensible indiscretions of the few to cast a shadow on the Church as a whole," Abela said.

"The Catholic Church remains committed to safeguarding children and all vulnerable people and to seeing that there is no hiding place for those who seek to do harm," the Maltese president said.

At the same time, Abela suggested that there may still be work left to do.

"It is therefore the church and even the state's duty to work hand in hand to issue directives and enact legislation so that effective, transparent mechanisms are set-up, together with harmonized and expeditious procedures, in order to curb cases of abuse so that justice will not only be done but seen to be done."

Though a member of the left-leaning Labor Party in Malta, Abela has long been a staunch defender of the country's Christian roots. Recently, for example, Abela expressed "radical disagreement" with a decision

from the European Court of Human Rights regarding the removal of crucifixes from the walls of Italian public school classrooms.

For his part, Benedict did not refer to the crisis in his remarks during a welcoming ceremony at the Luga airport.

The pope made only an indirect allusion aboard the papal plane, saying that the church has been "wounded by our sins" but that the "shipwrecks" of life "a reference to his official motive for visiting Malta, to recall St. Paul's famous shipwreck here which led the evangelization of the island nation" can lead to a "new beginning."

After the welcome ceremony, Pope Benedict XVI moved on to a meeting with Abela and other government officials in the "Palace of the Grand Masters" in Valetta, which is today the seat of the presidency, but which was for almost three centuries the fortress from which the Knights of Malta ruled the island.

After the brief introductions, Benedict XVI and Abela stepped out onto a balcony to greet the crowd below. In a touch that seemed evocative in light of the sexual abuse crisis facing the church, a large crowd of some 5,000 children sang a hearty "Happy Birthday" to the pope in Italian, then a rousing chorus of "O Happy Day" in English.

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Pope Benedict celebrated his 83rd birthday on Friday, and will mark the fifth anniversary of his election to the papacy on Monday.

[John Allen is NCR senior correspondent. His e-mail address is jallen@ncronline.org.]



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