

Pope keeps focus on Malta's past, present -- not his own

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By JOHN L. ALLEN JR.

Valletta, Malta

While the sex abuse crisis is inevitably part of the subtext to Pope Benedict XVI's April 17-18 visit to Malta, so far it has not been the top note in the pope's own remarks. Instead, Benedict has interwoven notes of gratitude for Malta's Catholic past with strong pleas to preserve that identity in the present.

In his brief remarks at Luqa airport, Benedict applauded the rich tradition of Maltese missionaries, and called upon Malta to play a role in elaborating "European identity, culture and policy."

The pontiff then ticked off a host of specific issues to which Malta can make a contribution: "Tolerance, reciprocity, immigration," as well as "the true nature of the family," "the sacredness of human life from conception to natural death," and respect for religious freedom.

The reference to immigration picked up a point Benedict XVI also addressed on the papal plane en route to Malta, when the pontiff said that Malta can't be expected to solve the problems associated with South/North immigration all by itself. Benedict recommended common efforts to ensure that people can live a "dignified life" in their own homelands, but if they choose to move, they would also be able to find dignified conditions of life in their points of arrival.

Benedict urged Malta, which is an archipelago of six islands almost exactly equidistant between Sicily and the coast of North Africa, to serve as "a bridge of understanding between the peoples, cultures and religions which surround the Mediterranean."

Benedict later visited the Church of St. Paul in Rabat, which local tradition venerates as the place where St. Paul took refuge for three months in the year 60 AD after a shipwreck. There too he recalled the missionary tradition of Maltese Catholicism, greeting the missionaries present by praising their "challenging and often heroic vocation."

Benedict again stressed the application of Malta's Catholic roots to concrete social issues, especially "threats to the sacredness of human life and to the dignity of marriage and the family."

Those issues may figure prominently in Benedict's speeches partly at the suggestion of leaders in the local church, who have watched once-solid social support for Catholic positions on those issues erode in recent decades. A recent poll by the Malta Today newspaper found the country evenly divided on legalizing divorce, for example, and the same poll suggested that 54 percent of Maltese under 34 favor same-sex marriage.

As he has throughout the day, Benedict began and ended with a reference to St. Paul's famous shipwreck, observing that "sailors can map a journey, but God, in his wisdom and providence, charts a course of his own."

Tomorrow Benedict XVI will celebrate a large open-air Mass and then hold a session with local youth before returning to Rome. At the moment, there's a bit of drama surrounding that return, since it's not clear the papal plane will be able to take off if clouds of volcanic ash continue to disrupt flight schedules across Europe.

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