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Vatican strategy in Malta: 'Let Benedict be Benedict'

John L. Allen Jr. | Apr. 18, 2010 NCR Today

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Valletta, Malta

tTo the extent that the Vatican has a discernible public relations strategy for Pope Benedict XVI's weekend visit to the island nation of Malta, it might be expressed in a simple formula: "Let Benedict be Benedict."

tRather than allowing the global media to set the agenda, which in practice would have meant a near-exclusive focus on the sexual abuse crisis, the pontiff has instead concentrated on his core themes: Europe?s Christian roots, the struggle to defend human life and the family, a welcoming stance towards immigrants, and the important of not succumbing to secular values and relativism.

tAt least on the ground in this nation of 400,000, where 94 percent of the population is Catholic, the strategy appears to be working. Crowds for the pope have been large and lively, and the *Times* of Malta led its day one wrap-up coverage by referring to the ?enthusiastic welcome? the pope received.

tThe Vatican spokesperson, Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi, told reporters yesterday evening that the popular response to the pope has exceeded expectations. To date, there?s been no hint of the protests over the pope's handling of the sexual abuse crisis that some media coverage had predicted.

tDespite the strong popular response, it?s not clear that Benedict?s ?be himself? strategy will succeed entirely in changing the subject.

tAboard the papal plane en route to Malta, Benedict offered what his spokesperson, Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi, described as a ?discrete reference? to the sexual abuse crisis, referring to how the body of the church is ?wounded because of our sins.?

tBeyond that, Benedict so far has not mentioned the crisis in any of his public remarks, and spokespersons have yet to confirm whether he will or won?t meet victims before he leaves for Rome later today. (That?s if the pope is able to leave; the clouds of volcanic ash currently disrupting air traffic across Europe have left this evening?s return flight a bit uncertain.)

tMalta has recently been rocked by its own local version of the broader crisis, with ten men coming forward to claim that they were abused by four priests during the 1980s and 1990s at St. Joseph orphanage in Santa Venera. One of the alleged victims is a convicted murder who killed a man with a hammer in 1991 and then cut his body to pieces with a broken bottle, and who has linked that horrific crime to abuse he suffered at the orphanage.

tSome of those ten men have requested a meeting with Pope Benedict to close what they called a ?hurtful chapter.? Though that meeting remains uncertain, the victims have announced that Maltese Monsignor Charles Scicluna, the promoter of justice in the Vatican?s Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, has agreed to receive them in Rome in June.

tInteresting, the most explicit commentary on the crisis during the pope?s trip so far has come not from the pontiff but from Malta?s president, George Abela, who welcomed Benedict yesterday at Luqa airport.

Abela, a Catholic attorney with a background in canon law, said it?s wrong to use the actions of a few to condemn the church as a whole, but he also called for church and state to work together towards more ?transparent? and ?effective? procedures to end abuse, ?so that just will not only be done but seen to be done.?

tPerhaps it says something that a politician, always more sensitive to public opinion, felt obliged to tackle the sex abuse issue head on, while the pope appeared more willing to follow his own lead.

tMost of Benedict?s public commentary so far has begun and ended with the memory of St. Paul, whose famous shipwreck on Malta, as described in the Acts of the Apostles, this year marks its 1,950th anniversary. Benedict has repeatedly invoked the memory of that shipwreck as an example of how apparent misfortune can be used for God?s purposes.

tThis morning, the pope will celebrate an open-air Mass and then hold a large meeting with Maltese youth this afternoon before returning to Rome ? assuming, of course, that the papal plane is allowed to take off.

If Benedict has refused to allow the sexual abuse crisis to cloud his trip to Malta, however, perhaps he?ll also be able to skirt the physical clouds of ash that threaten to scuttle his return.

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