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Benedict's strategy on crisis: 'Pastoral not Political'

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

Valletta, Malta -- By meeting privately with sex abuse victims here, but avoiding any public apologies or defense of his record on handling sex abuse cases, Pope Benedict XVI seems to have confirmed his strategy for engaging the fallout from the crisis, one that might be summarized in a sound-bite: ?Pastoral, not Political.?

tIn other words, Benedict is willing to do the behind-the-scenes pastoral outreach he believes the suffering of victims demands, but he is otherwise largely opting out of the wider public debate over the church?s policies on sexual abuse, as well as the critical examination of his past.

At a pastoral level, the logic for today?s meeting with victims was abundantly clear.

Malta has recently been rocked by its own sex abuse crisis, centering on ten men who recently alleged they were abused during the 1980s and 1990s by Catholic priests at a local church-run orphanage. One of those alleged victims has attributed a horrific crime he committed in 1991, murdering a homosexual man with a hammer and then cutting his body to pieces with a broken bottle, to his experience of abuse at the orphanage.

That individual was not in today's session with the pope.

tBy meeting with the victims, Benedict XVI hoped to demonstrate his personal sensitivity to their suffering, as well as offering a recognition that the church is obliged to reach out. As any act by a pope inevitably does, the meeting also sets a tone for other church leaders around the world.

tYet by insisting that these meetings occur only in private and without media coverage, the pope has also demonstrated a determination that they not become public spectacles ? in part, perhaps, to avoid impressions of exploiting the victims to score PR points. (Inevitably, some critics will see the meeting in those terms, as they did with previous encounters with victims in the United States and Australia in 2008.)

Earlier this week, a Vatican spokesperson outlined the pope's philosophy about sessions with victims.

?The general approach is that the meetings must be done calmly and intentionally, to create an atmosphere of discretion and reflection, not under media pressure,? said Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi.

?There must be the possibility of listening and personal communication," Lombardi said.

tBenedict has already offered public apologies for the sex abuse crisis on at least three occasions ? in the U.S. and Australia, and in his mid-March pastoral letter to the Catholics of Ireland. By not offering yet another such apology in Malta, Benedict is arguably trying to avoid cheapening the value of those earlier statements by making them appear rote.

tSome Vatican officials have privately argued that if the pope were to apologize again in Malta, it might set the precedent that he can?t travel anywhere in the world without doing so ? making such apologies, in effect, almost

as pro forma in papal rhetoric as invocations of the Virgin Mary.

tFurther, by refusing to offer any other public comment on the crisis, including any sort of response to mounting criticism of his own record, Benedict?s calculation appears to be that he?s not going to seek to win over secular public opinion. That?s a project, by the way, that a growing chorus of senior church officials regards as a losing proposition, since they believe the secular deck is stacked.

Ultimately, the gamble implied in this behind-the-scenes strategy is this: Over the long run, will the pope win points for his refusal to follow the spin-saturated crisis management strategies typically employed by politicians, sports stars and corporate CEOs? In other words, will his public reticence seem more like sincerity than denial?

Or, will his pastoral outreach come across as an empty gesture until he offers a substantive response to widespread criticism of the Catholic church?s policies, as well as his own record?

Whichever way things break, Benedict can at least take comfort that in this small but fiercely Catholic nation, he drew large and enthusiastic crowds. Two headlines in this morning?s *Times* of Malta showed that the fervor crossed generational boundaries: one referred to the ?giggles and shrieks? among young Maltese pilgrims, while another boasted that even ?slipped discs, cancer and old age fail to deter the faithful.?

Malta, in other words, is a place where what might be called Benedict?s ?base? ? faithful Catholics inclined to give the pope the benefit of the doubt, and to regard much of the recent criticism as unjust ? represents a remarkably high share of the population.

How well the pope?s pastoral strategy will play in less fervidly Catholic corners of the world remains to be seen.

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