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For Benedict, Malta was a break in the storm

John L. Allen Jr. | Apr. 19, 2010

This is the logo for Pope Benedict XVI's April 17-18 visit to the Mediterranean island of Malta.

Rome -- For much of Pope Benedict XVI's April 17-18 visit to Malta, it was unclear whether the plumes of volcanic ash currently disrupting air travel in Europe would allow the pontiff to return to Rome as scheduled Sunday evening. In the end, however, the weather cooperated, and Benedict made it safely home.

Metaphorically, too, Malta seemed to offer a break in the storms raging around Benedict's papacy for the last month, in the form of mounting criticism of his handling of the sexual abuse crisis.

"The pope arrived in Malta with the church under a cloud," the *Times* of Malta opined in its wrap-up coverage, "and he must have left here satisfied that his visit had gone a long way to lifting it."

Malta is an archipelago composed of six islands in the Mediterranean, located halfway between Sicily and the North African coast. Its 400,000 people are 94 percent Catholic, with roughly half still attending Mass on a weekly basis, a robust number by European standards. Those Catholic roots are reflected in ways large and small ? including the fact that in Maltese courts, people don't put their hands on a Bible to swear to tell the truth, they kiss a crucifix.

Large crowds flocked to the pope wherever he went, including more than 40,000 people who turned up for an open-air Mass on Sunday in the Granaries Square in Floriana, so named because it once conserved Malta's food supply. Despite some early morning drizzle, the sun broke out shortly before the pope arrived, and he was greeted with warm applause and cries of "*Viva il papa*!"

(Though the pope seemed energized by the reception, he is nevertheless now 83 years old, and occasionally seemed a bit fatigued. At one point during Sunday Mass, he appeared to nod off and was quickly nudged awake by an aide.)

Later in the day, more than 10,000 young people turned out for a rally with the pope in the upscale Waterfront area in Valletta, getting pumped up for four hours by high-octane Christian rock bands, and then exploding with enthusiasm when the pope finally arrived. Benedict made his way to the spot on a catamaran, crossing Malta's Grand Harbor at the head of a flotilla which was greeted a salute of canon fire as it passed by. All along the route, Maltese jammed the edges of the harbor to wave papal flags and to cheer.

On Saturday, more than 5,000 children flocked to Malta's Presidential Palace, where Benedict XVI was meeting President George Abela. When the pontiff stepped out onto a balcony to greet the crowd, the children broke into "Happy Birthday," celebrating the pope's 83rd birthday the day before, and then segued into a rousing chorus of "O Happy Day."

Prior to the trip, some media outlets had anticipated scattered protests against the pontiff, and there were indications of potential blowback. Days before the pope arrived, a few posters had been defaced with Hitler moustaches and the word "pedophile." In the end, however, no anti-papal demonstrations materialized, and most people seemed pleased the pope was in town.

All in all, if one were to assess the state of Benedict's papacy exclusively on the basis of his reception in Malta, it would be difficult to sustain the notion that the pontificate is in meltdown ? or, to use the maritime image that ran throughout the weekend, that it's on the brink of shipwreck.

(The official motive for Benedict's trip was to mark the 1,950th anniversary of St. Paul's famous shipwreck on Malta, described in chapters 27-28 of the Acts of the Apostles. The image was so pervasive during the trip that Air Malta christened the flight carrying the pope back to Rome "Flight 1950.")

For the first time in a long time, Benedict XVI even seemed to make a bit of progress on the sex abuse front. The pontiff met with a group of eight victims of abuse in a local church-run orphanage in the 1980s and 1990s, and afterwards participants described a moving encounter in which even the pope had tears in his eyes.

A written Vatican statement afterwards said the pope had pledged that "the church is doing, and will continue to do, all in its power to investigate allegations, to bring to justice those responsible for abuse and to implement effective measures designed to safeguard young people in the future."

Lawrence Grech, the primary spokesperson for the victims in Malta, said the experience had a powerful personal impact.

"For a long time I haven't gone to Mass, and I had lost the faith," he said. "Now I feel like a convinced Catholic again."

Another victim who met the pope, Joseph Magro, said, "I have made my peace with the church."

This was the third time Benedict XVI has met sex abuse victims during a foreign trip, after the United States and Australia, both in 2008. He also met a delegation of members of "First Nations" from Canada in Rome in April 2009 who had been abused in church-run residential schools.

While organized victims' groups were critical of the meeting as an empty gesture without policy significance, it at least offered an indication that the pope is engaged with the crisis ? an important point given that Benedict otherwise did not mention it in Malta, except in an indirect comment to journalists aboard the papal plane that the body of the church is "wounded by our sins."

Overall, the Vatican strategy for the Malta trip mostly seemed to be "let Benedict be Benedict." His five public speeches contained classic themes, including the defense of Christian identity against secularism and relativism, and upholding traditional Catholic positions on contested social issues such as abortion, divorce, and the family.

"You should be proud that your country, alone among the states of the European Union, both defends the unborn and promotes stable family life by saying no to abortion and divorce," the pope told Maltese youth during the Waterfront rally.

During his homily in the Mass at Granaries Square, Benedict warned the Maltese not to uncritically assimilate secular assumptions.

"Remember that the exchange of goods between these islands and the world outside is a two-way process," he said. "What you receive, evaluate with care, and what you have that is of value, be sure to share with others."

The pope also repeatedly called for protection of refugees and asylum seekers. That's an important theme in Malta, which shoulders a disproportionate share of the European burden of caring for African refugees attempting to make their way to the West.

In the end, however, Benedict's brief swing in Malta seemed a trip defined less by its content than by its mood. On Sunday evening, images of the pope smiling and relaxed, in the company of a dozen or so young Maltese aboard a catamaran in Valletta's Grand Harbor, did more than any formal Vatican statement to suggest that he's not heading for the bunkers amid the present crisis.

At a time when the public image of the papacy seems to be in free-fall, Benedict's outing showed that at least in this corner of the Catholic world, and at least for this weekend, he could still count on a strong residue of popular support.

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