

## Lessons from a papal visit to Malta

Douglas W. Kmiec | Apr. 19, 2010



Douglas Kmiec, the U.S. ambassador to Malta

### Commentary

With great anticipation and happiness, Malta awaited the visit of the Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI. Like all truly special moments in life, the weekend visit seemed to rush by in an instant.

The pope came to formally celebrate the 1,950th anniversary of St. Paul's arrival on the island. Of course, the media largely only wanted to talk scandal. The people of Malta didn't let them.

The President of Malta George Abela welcomed the pontiff to a country deeply in love with the faith, and the Holy Father returned that love in abundance to the dignitaries who met him at the airport, to the tens of thousands who worshiped with him at the open-air Mass, to the young people with whom he cruised upon the bay or to those packed along the waterfront waving pennants and delighting in chanting and singing his name. Throughout, one witnessed a pope caring deeply for others. This was on display for all to see.

The pontiff extended the same concern to those adults who recounted crushingly ugly abuse decades earlier as a child. These are truly crushingly ugly accounts. These meetings were conducted off the schedule and in private. Notwithstanding the editorial desire to dwell on only this, Malta's liturgical tradition allowed Benedict XVI to stay on message.

The message in Malta is of a faith that Americans like myself growing up in the 1950s did not think we would ever be privileged to again witness. The love for the church on this remarkable island is its great source of happiness. This was, frankly, obvious everywhere we worshiped during this our first Holy Week in Malta -- from the blessing of the chrism in St. John's where hundreds of clergy recommitted to their priestly vows; to the Holy Thursday re-enactments of the Last Supper; the all night vigils before the Eucharist, the seven church visits, the adoration of the cross on Good Friday and the stunning processions before crowds four or five lines deep to the paschal candles bringing light back into a very darkened world to the sheer exuberance of the Hallelujah first sung and then sent aloft to the heavens aboard abundant fireworks on Easter Sunday.

Malta's love for the church is liturgical, spiritual, and a source of inner conversion.

And perhaps most importantly in relation to the situation we face in America, Malta has thus far been careful not to see the church as a vehicle to impose upon the culture either liberal or conservative political worldviews, but rather as a vessel of Christ's unconditional forgiveness.

Today in America, there is a problematic level of conscious entwinement of church with politics that begs reconsideration. Some churchmen may think faith strengthened by an alliance with power, but it is the opposite. It is then simply mortgaged to the next election. The Maltese love to talk politics like my fellow Americans, perhaps more with election turn-outs exceeding 98 percent, but the maintenance of morality is ceded to the conversion of heart in church, not the change of mind at the ballot box.

Even more disturbing is how mixing the politically profane with the sacred diminishes the joy of "He is Risen" which is the transformative joy of forgiveness. Hate the sin; love the sinner, but mix in politics and it becomes all too easy in this life to confuse sin and sinner. Hate abortion, and you end up hating the women who confusedly saw the barbaric practice as necessary; hate despicable acts of sexual license and you hate the perpetrator of them. When we hate in these ways, we do not accept the risen Lord because we reject His model of unqualified forgiveness.

In the weeks leading up to Palm Sunday, no one threw the first stone at the adulterous woman because no one was free of sin. In Christ's own words: "as they do not condemn you, nor will I, go and sin no more." Or in his ultimate words on Good Friday, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do."

These words of unequivocal and unambiguous forgiveness are the essence of the joy of the Risen Christ. Miss them and your life will be not one of happiness, but anger. Miss them and you miss the meaning of the Great Commandment to love one's neighbor. Miss them and you cannot truly love the church.

As the bride of Christ, the Catholic church is spotless in its purity, unbounded in its charity, manifest in all the gifts of the Holy Spirit. The bride should never be conflated with the clergy or laity even when they are at their best, let alone when they betray what the church represents. In the end, only the devil profits when civil wrong is thought to displace the spiritual strength of the church and our love for it.

When the Holy Father waved good-bye, Malta and the world had been reminded that the truth of the "uncommon kindness" associated with the arrival of Paul in Malta recorded in the Acts of the Apostles sets human shortcoming and divisive partisanship aside to reaffirm that "above all, let your charity and zeal show how you love the Church."

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