

Benedict in Portugal: A different crisis, secularism, and 'Marian Cool'

John L. Allen Jr. | May. 7, 2010 All Things Catholic

As fate would have it, Pope Benedict XVI's five foreign trips in 2010 are almost laid out in ascending order of difficulty. Last month's weekend stop in Malta, arguably the most Catholic society on earth, amounted to the warm-up act, while next week's four-day swing in Portugal, which so far has been spared the sexual abuse scandals which have engulfed the church elsewhere in Europe, should be a fairly smooth ride as well.

(One shouldn't be overly dogmatic about such predictions, however. It's worth remembering that it was in Fatima in 1982 that a Lefebvrite priest named Juan Krohn attacked Pope John Paul II with a bayonet. Though the Vatican was fuzzy on the details at the time, John Paul's private secretary, now Cardinal Stanislaw Dziwisz of Krakow, said in 2008 that the pope was actually wounded. During his subsequent trial, Krohn asserted that John Paul was actually a closet Communist attempting to subvert the Vatican from within. A Spaniard by birth, Krohn was expelled by the Society of St. Pius X and eventually left the priesthood. He recently reemerged in an interview with Portuguese TV to complain that he never got a papal pardon like Mehmet Ali Agca, who shot John Paul II in St. Peter's Square in 1981. All that, I suppose, belongs in the "anything can happen" file.)



Pope Benedict XVI visits Lisbon and Fatima in Portugal May 11-14.

After Portugal, Benedict's itinerary gets complicated in a hurry. In June he travels to Cyprus, where he'll attempt the virtually impossible -- satisfying both the Turks and the Greeks, both of whom have a powerful political and emotional investment in the island. The pope sees Turkey as crucial to his outreach to the Islamic world, and the Greeks as key players in Catholic/Orthodox relations. The pope will also present the working document for October's Synod on the Middle East, where job number one will be to trying to figure out some way of preventing Christianity from effectively disappearing in the land of Christ.

In September, Benedict travels to the United Kingdom, a thoroughly secular society with a long history of anti-Catholicism? not to mention, of course, that some voices in the UK have floated the idea of an arrest warrant for Benedict when he steps off the plane. Finally, the pope will visit Spain in November, where the Socialist government of Prime Minister Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero has become the bogeyman of the Vatican's imagination -- a global symbol of secularism on steroids, challenging the church on every conceivable front, from abortion to gay marriage to public funding for church-run schools and charities.

Portugal, where Benedict will visit the capital city of Lisbon and the famed Marian shrine in Fatima, thus looms

as a dress rehearsal for the more complicated trips later in the year. In the run-up, three aspects of the trip seem especially striking.

'The Crisis'

A country of 10.6 million that's officially 88 percent Catholic, Portugal may be one of the few corners of the Catholic world these days where the phrase "the crisis" does not immediately summon images of the sexual abuse scandals in the church.

Bishop António dos Santos Marto of Leiria-Fátima recently told Portuguese journalists that he does not expect the sexual abuse mess to "overshadow" the pope's visit, in part because so far there's been no eruption in Portugal along the lines of Ireland and Germany.

Instead, when you say "crisis" to most Portuguese these days, they assume you're talking about economic turmoil brought on recently when international investors targeted the country's debt. That move wiped out billions from the Portuguese stock market almost overnight, and raised fears that the country could go the way of Greece in terms of economic free-fall and social chaos. An emergency austerity plan from the government of Prime Minister José Sócrates has triggered labor strikes and other protests across the country.

Although it's terrible to put it like this, in some ways Portugal's trouble couldn't have come at a better time for Benedict XVI. It means that in addition to the familiar litany of questions about his handling of priestly abuse, people will also be eager to hear what the pope has to say about economic justice -- and on that score, the pope arrives locked and loaded.

In effect, Portugal offers Benedict XVI a laboratory for concrete application of the principles he sketched in his July 2009 social encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*.

Since many politicians and analysts in Portugal believe that the current crisis stems in part from an irrational over-reaction by investors to the meltdown in Greece, the situation affords Benedict a natural opportunity to reprise his teaching from *Caritas in Veritate* about the dangers of what he called "scandalous speculation" and the need for a global authority with "real teeth" capable of regulating financial markets.

More broadly, the market turmoil in Europe provides a natural backdrop for Benedict to sketch, as he does in *Caritas in Veritate*, what he calls a vision of "Christian humanism" for economic reform. In essence, the pope's pitch is that fixing structures or rules won't do the trick unless the moral architecture of the economy is also considered.

"The conviction that the economy must be autonomous, that it must be shielded from 'influences' of a moral character, has led man to abuse the economic process in a thoroughly destructive way," the pope wrote in *Caritas in Veritate*.

Current events suggest there are few places on earth where Benedict is likely to find a more receptive audience for that message than in Portugal. One natural opportunity to deliver it will come in a meeting with social workers, including non-Catholic organizations, which Benedict XVI is holding at the request of the Portuguese bishops.

The battle with secularism

In his landmark book *A Secular Age*, Charles Taylor distinguishes three senses of the word "secularism": the separation of church and state; declines in religious faith and practice; and a change in the "plausibility structures" within a culture, in which non-religious explanations of life become the most convincing.

Western Europe is probably the only place on earth where secularism in all three senses is truly a grass-roots phenomenon. As part of the Catholic belt near the Mediterranean, Portugal is perhaps slightly less secularized than, say, Sweden or Great Britain, but nonetheless the church's hold on society is certainly not what it once was. Polls, for example, show that only about 19 percent of Portuguese Catholics attend Mass on a weekly basis.

Not only is Catholicism in Portugal buffeted by the prevailing secular winds, but in some ways its prestige still suffers from its profile under the long-running dictatorship of António de Oliveira Salazar, whose regime controlled the country from 1932 until the "Carnation Revolution" of 1974.

Despite some pockets of opposition, for the most part the Catholic church backed Salazar -- a former seminarian and ferocious anti-Communist, whose erstwhile roommate in college went on to become the Cardinal Patriarch of Lisbon. Salazar routinely invoked papal social encyclicals to justify his economic policies. When the regime finally imploded, a good chunk of the Catholic church's institutional credibility went with it.

More recently, Portugal has reflected the broader direction of most EU states. Under Socialist Prime Minister José Sócrates, Portugal legalized abortion during the first ten weeks of pregnancy following a national referendum in 2007, and the parliament recently approved a new law authorizing gay marriage. The measure is presently awaiting the signature of President Anibal Cavaco Silva, a Catholic and a member of the more conservative opposition party. Even if Cavaco Silva demurs, however, the Socialists say they have enough votes to override his veto. Assuming the measure eventually becomes law, Portugal will join five other European nations to permit gay marriage: Spain, Belgium, the Netherlands, Norway and, most recently, Sweden. Iceland is also currently debating a gay marriage law.

At one level, the challenge awaiting Pope Benedict is to support last-ditch efforts to derail the gay marriage law. Though the pontiff is unlikely to enter into the nitty-gritty of political debate, he will almost certainly recall Portugal to its Christian roots and stress the importance of Europe's Christian values as a basis for public policy. The Portuguese will hear that, at least in part, as a reference to the present debate over marriage and the family.

Yet Benedict XVI is nothing if not a realist, meaning that he realizes the political winds are blowing against the church across Western Europe. In the not too distant future, most EU members will likely permit abortion, gay marriage, and some form of euthanasia, despite the staunch pro-life advocacy of the Vatican and Catholic bishops in each nation. Traditional legal and financial privileges of the church are likely to be further eroded in many European societies as well.

Up against those realities, Benedict XVI is trying to prepare European Catholics for a future as a "creative minority," meaning a subculture that cannot rely upon state sponsorship (and which, in fact, will likely face considerable social push-back). Sociologically speaking, Benedict's emphasis on reviving traditional markers of Catholic faith and practice -- such as Mass in Latin, or communion on the tongue -- represents a sort of "politics of identity," intended to protect the church from assimilation to the dominant secular milieu.

One can expect a version of this "politics of identity," addressed to Portugal but really directed at all of Europe, to loom especially large during the first stage of the trip in Lisbon.

Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi, the Vatican spokesperson, reminded journalists during a May 4 briefing that John Paul II used a 1991 trip to Fatima to announce a Synod of Bishops for Europe. Lombardi suggested that Benedict XVI will likewise probably have a fair bit to say about Europe during his stay in Fatima.

Fatima and "Marian cool"

Benedict XVI does not have the same dramatic personal connection with Fatima as his predecessor John Paul II.

The 1981 assassination attempt against John Paul by Mehmet Ali Agca fell on May 13, the Feast of Our Lady of Fatima, and John Paul credited the Virgin of Fatima with saving his life. (According to some reconstructions of the shooting, Ali Agca's bullet followed a strange elliptical path rather than a straight line, thereby avoiding the pope's vital organs.)

One year later, John Paul travelled to the shrine in Portugal to place the bullet doctors had removed from his body in the golden crown on the original statue of Our Lady of Fatima. While in the Chapel of the Apparitions in Fatima on Wednesday, Benedict XVI is expected to recite a prayer recalling John Paul II and his dedication of the bullet from the assassination attempt.

Fatima, of course, is primarily famous for a series of apparitions of Mary to three shepherd children in 1917, and the revelations those children reported receiving. Two of the three children, Jacinta and Francisco Marto, died in the global flu epidemic which began in 1918, while the third, Lúcia Santos, became a Discalced Carmelite nun and died in 2005.

Given John Paul's mystical attachment to Fatima, it's no surprise that he took the revelations seriously indeed. In 2000, he ordered publication of the famous "Third Secret" of Fatima, which for decades had been the object of rumor and speculation. (The first secret was a vision of Hell, while the second involved World War I and the consecration of Russia to the Sacred Heart.) As published by the Vatican in 2000, the third secret features a vision of a bishop dressed in white who ascends a mountain and is fired upon by soldiers with bullets and arrows. The popular interpretation sees in the "bishop in white" a reference to John Paul II and the 1981 assassination attempt.

(For the record, some Fatima devotees believe the text released in 2000 is not the real Third Secret, which they contend involves a doomsday prediction of an apocalypse, perhaps related to "apostasy" in the Catholic church after the Second Vatican Council.)

Ever the rational academic, Benedict XVI has never really embraced the florid visions or private devotions that swirl around Marian sanctuaries such as Fatima, La Salette, or Medjugorje. His interest in Fatima has always been less mystical than theological -- seeing it primarily as a reminder of Mary's role in salvation history as the one who introduces Christ to the world.

In the May 4 Vatican briefing, Lombardi suggested that the best window onto Benedict's attitude towards Fatima comes in his comments back in 2000, when he put the publication of the "Third Secret" into theological context.

On that occasion, then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger played down the significance of the secret, saying that "no great mystery is revealed" and that "the veil of the future isn't lifted."

Ratzinger went on to make a careful distinction between public revelation, meaning principally the Bible, and private revelation such as the visions of Fatima. The former, he said, demands faith, while the latter is simply a "help to faith" and the basic criterion for its truth is whether it orients one to Christ.

While acknowledging that Fatima has been approved by the church, he suggested that some of the more famous claims associated with the three seers may have been "interior signs" rather than something belonging to "our normal sensible world." Not every detail of the visions has meaning, he warned, and altogether they represent a "symbolic language" requiring interpretation by the church.

In general, he said, the role of Mary of Fatima is that same as that of Mary in the New Testament, especially the Gospel of John -- she achieves a kind of "synergy" with her son, thereby opening up Christ's mercy for the world, especially its poorest and most forgotten. (Ratzinger noted that the peasant youth of Fatima were not

exactly big wheels in "the religious and cultural debates of the day.")

Ratzinger stressed three key words from the text of the Third Secret: "Penance, penance, penance."

"The vision invites us to do penance," he said, "to convert, to orient ourselves to God and his beloved son, in order to receive from his death on the cross the gift of new life."

Ratzinger also stressed Mary's important as a symbol of the dignity of women.

The Virgin of Fatima, he said, "reminds the church and the world of the meaning and importance of the Mother of the Lord in salvation history, and therefore the meaning and value of women, of every woman, in human affairs."

All in all, Pope Benedict XVI's approach to Fatima is a classic illustration of what I've elsewhere called his "Marian cool." He has an obvious personal devotion to Mary, and a keen sense of her theological importance, but he doesn't go in for the more exotic strains of end-time speculation or elaborate spiritual practices. He's too much a master of mainstream Catholic tradition to follow its tributaries very far.

Benedict's, in other words, is a cerebral, restrained, "cool" form of Marian devotion. Watching him trot it out in one of the "hottest" Marian sanctuaries anywhere in the world should make for an interesting experience.

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