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An ëAffirmative Orthodoxy' tour de force in Portugal

John L. Allen Jr. | May. 12, 2010 NCR Today

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Lisbon, Portugal

t If anyone other than Pope Benedict XVI had delivered the speech he gave this morning in the Cultural Center of Belém in Lisbon, Portugal, it might well have been taken as a throwback to the great liberal Catholic lions of yesteryear.

Among the highlights of Benedict?s address to the ?world of culture? were: The urgency of constructive dialogue with secularism; moving beyond mere tolerance of other worldviews and value systems to being ?enriched? by them; and praise of the Second Vatican Council for taking the Enlightenment and the Reformation seriously, and for laying the basis for a ?civilization of love.?

Someone conversant with recent Catholic history might have wondered if Benedict was somehow channeling Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini of Milan.

In reality, this morning?s address was not a matter of Benedict stepping out of his own ideological skin, but rather a classic example of what is arguably the most under-acknowledged feature of his pontificate: Its spirit of ?Affirmative Orthodoxy,? meaning an unyielding commitment to classic Catholic identity, but expressed in the most relentlessly positive fashion possible.

The well-chronicled cycle of crises in the Vatican over the last five years have often meant that the distinctive features of Benedict?s teaching don?t register on the broader public radar screen, but they?re no less real ? and this morning, Benedict XVI delivered an Affirmative Orthodoxy tour de force.

Ever the academic, Benedict?s speeches to leaders in culture, science and the arts are always among the most personal and carefully considered during his foreign trips. In his address this morning, the pope made three basic points:

?tThe best of modernity lies in a broad humanistic ?wisdom,? expressed in values such as universality and fraternity. That wisdom rests on a three-legged historical stool formed by Christianity, the Enlightenment and secular thought. Trying to suppress Christianity makes the stool wobbly, so the church?s defense of objective truth is a matter of saying ?yes? to those values rather than ?no? to rival ideas.
?tDialogue among different cultures and philosophical systems is a ?priority in the world, from which the church does not intend to withdraw.? In fact, Benedict quoted Pope Paul VI to the effect that ?the church must enter into dialogue with the world in which it finds itself.?
?tThe Second Vatican Council (1962-65) ?welcomed and recreated the best of the longings of modernity,? thereby generating ?an authentic Catholic renewal.?

Benedict presented Christianity as the ?champion of a high and healthy tradition,? which can help modernity overcome a perennial tension ? which at times becomes open conflict ? between its present and its past.

tIn effect, the pope argued, Western culture wants to have its cake and eat it too ? applauding the public service performed by Christians, but without the troublesome baggage of Christianity?s truth claims. Over the long haul, he warned, that?s a prescription for a moral vacuum in which there?s no bulwark against the naked will to power.

t?A people that gives up on knowing its own truth ends up lost in the labyrinth of time and of history, deprived of clearly defined values and lacking great goals,? he said.

tFor a society whose majority is composed of Catholics, the pope argued, it?s a ?dramatic? step to seek the truth outside revelation of Jesus Christ. The church?s ?proclamation of truth,? Benedict said, ?is a service it offers to society, opening new horizons for a future of greatness and dignity.?

tBenedict insisted that an unyielding defense of Christian truth does not imply any disrespect for other creeds or value systems ? though he conceded that striking the right balance between proclamation and dialogue is still an ?apprenticeship? for the church.

tThe pope called upon Christians to foster ?respect for other ?truths,? or the truths of others,? arguing that a ?dialogical respect? for other perspectives ?opens new doors for the transmission of the truth.?

tIn this connection, Benedict issued a strong plea for a kind of dialogue that goes well beyond mere tolerance.

t?It?s essential that people not only accept the existence of the culture of the other,? he said, ?but that they also aspire to be enriched by their culture, and to offer to others whatever they possess that?s good, true and beautiful.?

tBenedict then turned to Vatican II, praising the council for ?taking seriously ? the critiques which were at the basis of the forces that have characterized modernity,? specifically ?the Reformation and the Enlightenment.?

tThe council, Benedict said, ?welcomed and recreated the best of the longings of modernity, on the one hand going beyond them them, and on the other avoiding their errors and dead-end streets.?

tIn the end, Benedict said, Vatican II launched ?an authentic Catholic renewal? and laid the basis for ?a new civilization ? a ?civilization of love? as an evangelical service to humanity and to society.?

tConfirmation that Benedict?s upbeat tone was not an accident came last evening from Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi, the Vatican spokesperson, who told reporters that he has been ?struck by the positive message the pope is offering? in Portugal.

t?He has talked about dialogue, and the challenge of arriving at an anthropological vision that enables dialogue among the cultures,? Lombardi said. ?It?s a very constructive vision of the role of the church in secular culture.?

tLombardi said the pope was obviously attempting to strike an ?optimistic? note about the encounter between Christianity and culture.

tLater today, Benedict XVI arrives in Fatima, where he will visit the famed Chapel of Apparitions, commemorating what tradition regards as the appearances of the Virgin Mary to three shepherd children between May and October 1917. The pope will also lead a vespers service with priests, deacons and religious tonight, as well as praying the rosary before a torch-lit procession marking the vigil of the feast of Our Lady of Fatima on Thursday.

tAmong other things, Benedict is scheduled to recite a prayer recalling that Pope John Paul II placed the bullet

that struck him in the assassination attempt of 1981 in the crown of the statue of Our Lady of Fatima one year later. John Paul believed that the Virgin of Fatima saved his life that day, which was the feast of Our Lady of Fatima ? May 13, 1981.

tOn interesting footnote to Benedict?s meeting with the world of culture: It marked a rare occasion when the 83-year-old pontiff was decidedly the young buck on the stage. Benedict was welcomed by the 101-year-old Manoel de Oliveira, a famed Portuguese filmmaker who?s usually identified as the oldest active film director in the world.

tOliveira gave the pope a warm welcome, and afterwards Benedict approached him and offered a slight bow ? one of the few moments, perhaps, when the pope has the opportunity to model respect for his elders.

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