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Top Ten Papal Trips

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If you blinked last weekend you might have missed it, but Pope Benedict XVI visited Croatia on Saturday and Sunday, marking the 19th foreign journey of his pontificate. As papal travel goes, it wasn't really the stuff of high drama. (The main news flash was Benedict's support for Croatia joining the EU, pretty much a done deal in any event.)

This fairly routine excursion got me thinking: Of all the papal journeys we've seen over the years, which ones were truly memorable? That is, which trips did the most to shape history, to recalibrate public impressions, and/or to leave an imprint on the local church? Equally, which made an impression mostly for their screw-ups, heartache, or missed opportunities?

What follows are my personal choices for the "Top Ten Papal Trips."

By way of caveat, I restricted the pool to modern trips, meaning the 303 journeys outside Rome (171 to various locations in Italy, and 132 to foreign nations) taken over the last half-century by Popes John XXIII, Paul VI, John Paul II, and Benedict XVI. Otherwise, we'd be deep into apples and oranges comparisons. For instance, the #1 entry on an all-time countdown would have to be Peter's journey to Rome, traditionally dated to 44 AD, which set the stage for every future development in the history of the papacy. Clement V's decision in 1305 to settle in Avignon, which triggered the "Babylonian Captivity" of the papacy, might also make the list. Those, however, were really relocations rather than trips.

The "papal journey" as we know it today is an artifact of the period after the Second Vatican Council (1962-65). Influenced both by the ease of modern travel and the missionary spirit of Vatican II, popes have come to see themselves, as John Paul II once put it, as successors of St. Paul as well as St. Peter -- meaning a sort of "Evangelist-in-Chief", and a goodwill ambassador to the world. While every papal trip may be designed to reflect that notion equally, some are quite obviously more equal than others.

Putting together a list like this is a terribly subjective enterprise, in part because there are so many ways to assess the impact of a trip -- crowd size, media coverage, political fallout, importance in setting a precedent or opening the door to future developments, and fruits for the local church such as new vocations or increased Mass attendance. The trips that made the list all scored high on at least one of these measures, and the top few combined several.

10. John XXIII, Loreto-Assisi, Italy, October 4, 1962

Sometimes what a pope does is significant mostly for the sheer fact of it. Such was the case in October 1962, when John XXIII boarded a train at the tiny Vatican rail station to visit the Holy House of Loreto and the Basilica of St. Francis in Assisi. It was the first time a pope had left Rome since 1857, after Pius IX famously declared himself a "prisoner of the Vatican" in 1870 to protest the loss of the Papal States. By hopping the train, John XXIII effectively ended the isolation of the modern papacy. The trip came one week before the opening ceremony of Vatican II, and symbolically it captured both the evangelical thrust of the council and the embrace

of the modern world that would eventually be expressed in Gaudium et Spes. John XXIII spent most of the day-long trip at his window, waving at the large crowds along the rails. The train stopped several times along the way, like a whistle-stop campaign, with John XXIII saying a few words, cracking jokes, and offering a blessing. One other sign of things to come: Also on board was Italian Prime Minister Amintore Fanfani, who headed Italy's first ruling coalition that included Socialists. The historic "opening to the left" was not popular in some sectors of the Vatican, so Fanfani had been assigned a separate compartment far away from the pope. Halfway through the trip, however, journalists on board noticed Fanfani standing next to John XXIII and chatting amiably; it turned out the pope had invited the prime minister to join him, ignoring the objections of his own aides. (When asked about it afterwards, Fanfani quipped "nihil obstat quominus," the Latin formula for an imprimatur -- meaning that he had received a clean bill of health.) Looking back, Italian journalist Domenico del Rio wrote in 2000 that John XXIII's train ride was "the basis for all the pastoral journeys of his two itinerant successors, Paul VI and John Paul II."

9. John Paul II, Denver (United States), August 12-15, 1993

Okay, maybe this is a slightly parochial choice (after all, I live here), but the visit to Denver for 1993's World Youth Day makes my list for this reason: No other moment in recent history has had a more powerful impact in transforming Roman attitudes towards Catholicism in the United States. In advance, many observers predicted disaster. The United States, they insisted, is unlike Poland or Argentina, where previous World Youth Days had been held, because it's not a historically Catholic culture and has no tradition of pilgrimage. Further, the Rocky Mountains had been styled in the European imagination as an exotic land of Bible-thumpers and secularists, likely to greet the pope either with hostility or, even worse, indifference. Yet in the event, a half-million wildly enthusiastic young people showed up, the trip drew overwhelmingly positive media coverage, and John Paul's magic with crowds occasioned President Bill Clinton's famous tribute: "I sure as hell would hate to be running against him for mayor anywhere." Afterwards, Vatican mandarins were forced to reevaluate their prejudices about the United States as a fundamentally Calvinistic culture, hostile both to Catholicism and the papacy. Domestically, the trip also put youth ministry on the map in the American church. (As a footnote, the trip brought the first public commentary by a pope on the sexual abuse crisis. In an address at McNichols Arena, John Paul rued "the sins of some ministers of the altar.")

8. Benedict XVI, Turkey, Nov. 28-Dec. 1, 2006

The most serious crisis in Christian/Muslim relations since 9/11 erupted in September 2006, when Benedict XVI delivered a speech in Regensburg, Germany, in which he quoted a 13th century Byzantine emperor to the effect that Muhammad "brought things only evil and inhuman, such as his command to spread by the sword the faith he preached." That line triggered protest across the Islamic world, which made Benedict's trip to Turkey just two months later, his first to a majority Muslim state, a make-or-break moment in avoiding a "clash of civilizations." Benedict used the trip to send signals of reconciliation, including what is still arguably the most improbable image of his papacy: Benedict and the Grand Mufti of Istanbul, Mustafa Cagrici, standing before the *mirhab* in the famed Blue Mosque for a moment of silent prayer. The Turkey trip set the stage for later developments in Benedict's approach to relations with Islam, most notably the grand "alliance of civilizations" he proposed in Jordan May 2009.

7. John Paul II, Manila (Philippines), Jan. 12-16, 1995

Spiritual writers always insist that the Church isn't Microsoft, so fidelity is more important than worldly success. If quantitative measures were all that mattered, however, John Paul's visit to Manila for World Youth Day in 1995 would easily top the charts of triumphant papal outings. Turnout for his Mass in Luneta Park on Jan. 15, 1995, was estimated at between four and five million -- the largest crowd ever for a single papal event, and one of the largest peaceful gatherings in human history. (The only comparable event centering on a religious leader,

as opposed to a festival or pilgrimage site, would be the three to ten million Iranians who attended the funeral of Ayatollah Khomeni in June 1989.) The crowd was so thick that John Paul had to arrive by helicopter rather than the Popemobile. Like the Denver trip two years before, Manila amounted to a vindication of World Youth Day, launched by John Paul II over the skepticism of not a few church leaders who wondered if young people would really respond. (John Paul once quipped that although people think the purpose of World Youth Day is to convert the young, it's really to convert the bishops!)

6. (Tie) John Paul II, Nicaragua, March 4, 1983; John Paul II, Cuba, Jan. 21-26, 1998

Every trip into a difficult environment is a roll of the dice, and sometimes they come up snake eyes. When John Paul II visited Nicaragua in 1983, many hoped the pontiff would act as a peacemaker, easing tensions among the Sandinista regime, the local Catholic hierarchy, and the Contra rebels. Instead, the trip left the country even more polarized. (Who deserves the blame is, naturally, a debated point.) During a Mass in Managua, John Paul II became visibly angry at Sandinista agitators, yelling at them to be silent. The trip also produced an iconic image of John Paul II scolding Ernesto Cardenal, a liberation theologian and Sandinista supporter, which would become a stock item in progressive Catholic criticism of the pope. In contrast, the Cuba trip in 1998 was something of a missed opportunity because of bad timing. It was supposed to be a critical turning point, as pressure created by the global media spotlight forced Castro to open up. On the trip's eve, however, most media outlets bailed out to cover what they perceived as a juicer story: the Monica Lewinsky scandal, which erupted on the very day John Paul touched down in Havana. (By the way, John Paul later told aides that no world leader ever prepared for a papal trip as thoroughly as Castro, including quoting his encyclicals from memory during their private meetings.)

5. John Paul II, Mexico, Jan. 26-31, 1979

All told, John Paul II made 104 trips outside Italy, covering three-quarters of a million miles, more than three times the distance from the earth to the moon. His very first, to Mexico, debuted three defining features of his papacy. First, it underscored his fearlessness. His predecessor, John Paul I, had turned down an invitation to attend a meeting of the Latin American bishops in Puebla, fearing confrontation with Mexico's anti-clerical regime. John Paul II not only accepted, but wore his cassock everywhere he went, which was technically a violation of Mexican law. (The bishops who greeted him at the airport were in coats and ties.) Second, the trip established John Paul II's reputation as a magnet for humanity. In total, some ten million people are estimated to have seen the pope over six days. Some 3,600 journalists received accreditation to cover the pope's appearance in Puebla -- by comparison, only about a dozen showed up when the Latin American bishops met in 1978 in Medell'n. Third, the trip hinted at the ambivalent relationship John Paul would have with Liberation Theology. He denounced injustice, but he also emphasized the "primacy of the spiritual", rejected Marxism, and insisted on unity in the church. (On the same trip, John Paul also visited the Dominican Republic and the Bahamas. It's significant that his first journey took John Paul outside the West, as he would often use his travels to shine a spotlight on what he regarded as neglected corners of the world.)

4. Paul VI, Holy Land, Jan. 4-6, 1964

Although John Paul II is typically regarded as the "Pope of Firsts," in several cases it was actually Paul VI who broke the mold. Travel is an example: Paul VI took nine foreign trips, symbolically chosen to include all the continents of the earth. His first outing, while Vatican II was still underway, remains the most celebrated. It was the first time a pope had set foot in the Holy Land since the era of St. Peter, the first time a pope had left Italy in almost two centuries, and the first time a pope had ever taken an airplane. Substantively, the trip was significant for two reasons. First, it established the Middle East as a special focus of diplomatic concern for the Vatican, even though Paul repeatedly insisted that the visit was "purely pastoral." (It's also a reminder of how far things have come in the relationship with Israel; during his 11 hours on Israeli soil, Paul VI never even used the

country's name, and avoided all sites of Jewish significance such as Yad Vashem.) Second, the trip brought a towering breakthrough in Catholic/Orthodox relations. Paul VI met with Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras of Constantinople on the Mount of Olives, the first time a pope and patriarch had conferred since 1439. (When a reporter asked Athenagoras why he had come, he jokingly replied: "To say good morning to my brother the pope ? it's been 500 years since we've spoken!") The momentum generated by the meeting led to a mutual lifting of the anathemas which had separated Catholics and Orthodox since 1054, announced exactly one year later. In many ways, the 1964 trip was the high-water mark of Paul VI's pontificate; when he returned to Vatican II afterwards, he was greeted by an ovation from the bishops.

3. John Paul II, Assisi, October 27, 1986

In the spirit of "size doesn't matter," John Paul's October 1986 jaunt to Assisi was among the shortest journeys of his papacy, but also most significant. The idea was to bring together leaders of the world's religions to pray for peace, in the birthplace of Catholicism's premier ambassador of unity, St. Francis. Given that the Church has more than 2,000 years of history under its belt, it's tough to find something truly "unprecedented," but this was the real deal: The Roman Pontiff standing cheek by jowl with rabbis, muftis, shamans and Buddhist monks, in a common appeal to the Almighty. The event has lasting significance for three reasons. First, it lent powerful momentum to inter-religious dialogue and collaboration. John Paul would later convoke two other summits in Assisi, in 1993 and 2002, and the Community of Sant'Egidio began organizing an annual gathering of religious leaders "in the spirit of Assisi." Second, it demonstrated the unique capacity of the papacy to bring disparate personalities together, to galvanize media attention, and to move opinion. The Archbishop of Canterbury, Robert Runcie, said: "Only the Petrine office could convoke an assembly like this." Third, it underscored why Italian historian and Sant'Egidio founder Andrea Riccardi insists that John Paul II cannot accurately be understood as a "conservative", since he faced stiff criticism from the Catholic right that Assisi risked syncretism and religious relativism. Instead, Riccardi proposes that John Paul be recalled as "the pope of Catholic complexity."

2. John Paul II, Holy Land, March 20-26, 2000

As George Weigel has written, John Paul's pilgrimage to the Holy Land in the Great Jubilee year belongs "in the realm of the epic." Any list of indelible spiritual images of the 20th century would have to include a frail John Paul II, standing alone at the Western Wall in Jerusalem, leaving behind a handwritten note apologizing for centuries of Christian anti-Semitism. (Its key line was, "We are deeply saddened by the behavior of those who in the course of history have caused these children of yours to suffer.") The pope also visited the Yad Vashem Holocaust memorial, meeting seven survivors and saying, "There are no words strong enough to deplore the terrible tragedy of the *Shoah*." Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak described the visit as "the climax of a historic journey of healing." On the same trip, John Paul II entered the Palestinian Territories to meet Yasser Arafat. He also stopped at the Deheisheh refugee camp, where he said, "Throughout my pontificate I have felt close to the Palestinian people in their sufferings." To be sure, the voyage had its blemishes; the most explosive came during an inter-religious meeting at the Notre Dame Center in Jerusalem, when a rabbi and a sheikh essentially got into a shouting match. Yet taken as a whole, the trip symbolized one of the most remarkable accomplishments of John Paul's almost 27-year papacy. In contrast to the usual zero/sum logic of inter-faith relations, in which outreach to Muslims comes at the expense of good will with Jews, and vice-versa, John Paul II managed to revolutionize the church's relationship with both Judaism and Islam at the same time.

1. John Paul II, Poland, June 2-10, 1979

The Polish pope would make eight trips to his native land, including three before the fall of the Berlin Wall. Each of those early homecomings helped set the dominoes tumbling towards the collapse of the Soviet empire, but the first was the key. When John Paul's plane landed at Okecie Airport on June 2, 1979, church bells rang

across the country, an unmistakable signal that Communist efforts to eradicate Poland's Catholic identity had failed. John Paul barnstormed the nation, delivering 32 speeches in nine days, and was deluged by adoring crowds everywhere he went. Polish commentator Bogdan Szajkowski said the trip amounted to "a psychological earthquake, an opportunity for mass political catharsis." Vaclav Havel later called it a "miracle," arguing the trip was more important in inspiring anti-Soviet resistance than anything any other Western leader ever did. The iconic moment came during a Mass in Warsaw's Victory Square, in which John Paul prayed aloud: "Let your Spirit descend and renew the face of the earth ? the face of this land!" That line became an unofficial motto of the Solidarity movement, which was born one year later. Cardinal Stanislaw Dziwisz of Krakow, John Paul's longtime private secretary, summed the experience up as follows: "Today, without a doubt, we can say that his first pilgrimage to Poland was the most important of all the papal journeys," Dziwisz said in 2009, "because it sparked a process of incredible changes at the global level."

Bonus Feature

Here are eight other trips I considered which, for various reasons, didn't make the cut.

1. Benedict XVI, United States, April 15-21, 2008: Marking the first time a pope met with victims of sexual abuse, the trip created the template for the public dimension of how Benedict has engaged the crisis.
2. John Paul II, Chile, April 1987: The trip's iconic moment was John Paul II and Augusto Pinochet standing together on the balcony of Santiago's Moneda Palace. Critics say it exemplified an ambivalent stance on Latin American dictators; defenders call it a triumph of diplomacy, since shortly after the visit Pinochet began a transition to democratic rule.
3. Paul VI, Iran-Pakistan-Philippines-Samoan Islands-Australia-Indonesia-Hong Kong-Sri Lanka, Nov. 26-Dec.5, 1970: Paul's previous trips had been either to spiritually evocative sites (the Holy Land, Fatima) or to largely Christian countries. On this outing, he set a precedent of outreach to the whole world, including Islam and the great religions of Asia.
4. Benedict XVI, United Kingdom, Sept. 16-19, 2010: Arguably the greatest contrast of all papal trips between gloom-and-doom predictions beforehand, and surprisingly positive vibes afterwards.
5. John Paul II, Zaire-Congo-Kenya-Ghana-Burkina Faso-Ivory Coast, May 5-12, 1980: The first ever papal trip to Africa, it put the growth and dynamism of the African church on the map. It also featured the arresting image of John Paul wearing a headdress of ostrich feathers, holding a spear and a shield, and sitting on a drum covered in leopard skin.
6. John Paul II, Holland-Luxembourg-Belgium, May 11-21, 1985: The rancorous trip to Holland reflected the divisions in the post-Vatican II church, as John Paul was greeted by tepid crowds in some places and angry protests in others. Commentators dubbed it the "worst trip" of his papacy. One wrote: "Never before were the streets so empty, and the stone-throwers so nearby."
7. John Paul II, Ireland-United States, Sept. 29-Oct. 8, 1979: Among other things, the trip came to symbolize the ferment over women in Catholicism, when Mercy Sr. Teresa Kane used an address to the pope at Catholic University to ask that women be "included in all the ministries of the church."
8. John Paul II, Kazakhstan-Armenia, Sept. 22-27, 2001: Coming just eleven days after 9/11, many Vatican-watchers assumed the trip to Kazakhstan -- a majority Muslim nation in the same neighborhood as Afghanistan, where American bombs were about to fall -- would be cancelled as a security risk. Instead it occasioned remarkable images of solidarity, including a largely Muslim crowd attending the pope's outdoor Mass in the capital city of Astana.

Here's one final observation on papal travel. Based purely on past experience, one of the more hazardous destinations for any pope to visit is Manila. So far, there have been three papal visits and two attempted assassinations. In 1970, a Bolivian surrealist painter named Benjamin Mendoza Y Amor donned a cassock and tried to stab Paul VI with a dagger, protesting what he described as the "ignorance and hypocrisy" of religion. In

1995, a scheme to kill John Paul II engineered by Ramzi Yousef, an Islamic radical and one of the key figures in the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center, went awry when a chemical explosion caused the plotters' apartment to go up in smoke. I mention this because there continues to be speculation in the Philippines about a possible visit by Benedict XVI, which would certainly make life interesting from a security point of view.

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