

Three nuggets from pope's Germany trip

John L. Allen Jr. | Sep. 25, 2011 NCR Today

It probably says something about the low-key nature of a papal trip when its biggest news flash involves the shooting off of an air gun — not even a real gun, mind you — two hours before the pontiff's arrival, in the vague direction of two security agents stationed in the central square of Erfurt in advance of an open-air Mass.

The thirty-year-old who fired the air gun was quickly apprehended, and nobody who attended the Mass was even aware there had been a brief security scare. Nonetheless, media outlets jumped on the story, largely because the Sept. 22-25 trip itself did not generate the sort of immediate political excitement that drives talk shows and news pages.

Benedict XVI warned Germans in advance not to expect a "spectacle" or "sensations" from his third homecoming but first official state visit, and the four-day swing seemed to deliver on those expectations.

For the most part, the pontiff steered clear of commentary that could have been given a political spin, such as reflections on Germany's role in Europe, which is a matter of controversy these days given the continent's fiscal crisis and perceptions of German unwillingness to bail out weaker economies, or the hot-button cultural issues that swirl around the Catholic church, such as abortion, gay rights, and the family.

Benedict did draw protestors, including an opposition demonstration in Berlin estimated at some 9,000 people, but for the most part his message didn't give them much to work with.

Instead, Benedict focused on what German theologians call the *Gottesfrage*, or the "question of God." His basic argument was that beneath the pressing issues of the moment lies a deeper question: Is there space for God, for a reality beyond self-interest and the human will to power, in the ultra-secular cultural milieu of the 21st century?

Only by replying "yes", Benedict implied, will the other problems of the day become soluble.

Beyond that core point, there were three nuggets worth lifting up from the trip's record.

Inter-religious relations

First, Benedict XVI met with delegations of both Jews and Muslims, in what are likely to be his last formal inter-religious sessions before his summit of religious leaders in Assisi on Oct. 27.

His remarks to Muslims were especially striking. He held out the post-war German constitution as a model of a social order inspired by a specific religious vision (in this case, Christianity) that nonetheless protects religious pluralism. Indirectly, the pope seemed to be suggesting that Muslim societies could build similar legal orders, preserving their Islamic identity while also respecting the rights of religious minorities — a proposal with special relevance in the wake of the "Arab Spring" and fears about the prospect for theocratic regimes in important Muslim states such as Egypt.

Benedict also argued that religious groups can contribute to a pluralistic world by defending the moral and spiritual foundations of society, arguing "it is inconceivable that a society could survive in the long term without consensus on fundamental ethical values."

That joint effort is what Benedict means by a shift from "inter-religious" dialogue to "inter-cultural," and it's likely to feature prominently in his pitch at Assisi.

Ecumenism and Christian Geography

Second, an important bit of subtext to Benedict's return to the Land of Luther was his encounter with Germany's Lutheran tradition, and by extension the churches of the Reformation. In remarks during an ecumenical service in Erfurt, the pontiff essentially argued that the ecumenical situation has changed dramatically due to two factors:

- "The geography of Christianity," meaning the rapid expansion of "a new form of Christianity, which is spreading with overpowering missionary dynamism, sometimes in frightening ways," leaving "the mainstream Christian denominations often at a loss." Though the pope didn't spell it out, he was almost certainly referring to the spread of Evangelical and Pentecostal Christianity, now estimated to claim nearly a billion followers in a sprawling variety of churches and loosely organized movements. Its growth has been especially dramatic in the southern hemisphere.
- "The secularized context of the world in which we Christians today have to live and bear witness to our faith," which, the pope suggested, is a special challenge in Germany itself "and, by extension, the developed West.
- Both of those realities, the pope argued, mean that established Christian churches can no longer afford to dwell on their differences.

The pope's indirect warning about the Pentecostals and Evangelicals was especially interesting: "This is a form of Christianity with little institutional depth, little rationality and even less dogmatic content, and with little stability," he said, saying that bishops from around the world are "constantly" telling him about its expansion.

The suggestion seemed to be that Catholics and the Reformation churches shouldn't be consumed by their internal battles, but rather should engage this sprawling new form of Christianity, which needs the depth and structure they can both provide.

Small Christian Communities

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Third, Benedict throughout the trip repeatedly expressed understanding for Catholics frustrated with the church as a result of the sexual abuse scandals or other forces. Last year alone, according to official figures, some 18,000 German Catholics abandoned the church, double the total from the year before.

Yet in a meeting on Saturday with the Central Committee of German Catholics, widely considered to be one of the most powerful lay organizations in the world, Benedict insisted that the true need of the moment isn't structural reform of the church but spiritual renewal.

"We must honestly admit that we have more than enough by way of structure but not enough by way of Spirit," he said. "I would add: the real crisis facing the Church in the western world is a crisis of faith. If we do not find a way of genuinely renewing our faith, all structural reform will remain ineffective."

In terms of promoting a "new evangelization" that might draw jaded Westerners back to the faith, Benedict seemed to propose small Christian communities as one such model.

"Small communities could be one such path, where friendships are lived and deepened in regular communal adoration before God," he said.

"There we find people who speak of these small faith experiences at their workplace and within their circle of family and friends, and in so doing bear witness to a new closeness between Church and society. They come to see more and more clearly that everyone stands in need of this nourishment of love, this concrete friendship with others and with the Lord."

That papal endorsement could prove a boon for the small communities pastoral model, which has been especially successful in Latin America, often under the aegis of "base communities," and in Africa.

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