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Framing the pope's trip to Lebanon

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NCR Today

Editor's note: John Allen is in Rome all of this week. Watch NCR Today for his latest news.

ROME -- Quite often, how an event is framed beforehand determines judgments after the fact about whether it was a success or a failure. In the run-up to Pope Benedict XVI's Sept. 14-16 trip to Lebanon, which unfolds against the backdrop of ongoing violence in Syria, there seem to be four basic competing frames.

These four ways of seeing what's at stake aren't exactly mutually exclusive, but they are clearly different.

First, there's the official line from Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi, the Vatican spokesperson, asserting the pope is not traveling as a "powerful political leader" but as "the head of a religious community" whose mission is to confirm the Christians of the region "who serve the communities in which they live through the witness of their lives."

In that sense, Lombardi told reporters during a Vatican briefing Tuesday, expectations of "great political interventions" from the pope during his three days in Lebanon "are not consistent with the spirit of the trip."

Second, there's the frame proposed by Jesuit Fr. Paolo Dall'Oglio, a Jesuit who lived in Syria for 30 years prior to being expelled in June for his advocacy of the anti-Assad uprising. On Tuesday, Dall'Oglio finished an eight-day hunger strike in Rome intended to raise awareness about the Syrian situation.

Dall'Oglio issued a statement Tuesday expressing hope that the papal visit to Lebanon, the closest Benedict is every like to come to Syria, will be an occasion for unmasking the "lies of the regime" under Assad, and for demanding that the Christian nations of the West stop "giving the regime the possibility of

spilling more Syrian blood."

To date, the Vatican has expressed concern over the bloodshed in Syria and expressed support for an "international solution," but has not explicitly called for armed international intervention or for Assad to step down.

Third, there's the frame offered by Archbishop Louis Sako of Kirkuk, Iraq, who has suggested the papal trip should be a "line of last defense" stand in favor of Christian survival all across the Middle East.

As is well known, Christians today are estimated to represent no more than 5 percent of the population of the Middle East, down from 20 percent in the early 20th century. From 12 million today, the consensus estimate is that the Christian population of the Middle East will likely be 6 million in 2020. The decline is due to a number of factors, including lower birth rates, economic and political stagnation, and rising insecurity and the threat of Islamic radicalism.

"The rise of political Islam is a matter of worry," Sako said. "We Christians are a minority and there is no prospect of us gaining equal citizenship in the concrete reality of day-to-day life and there is no vision of a better future."

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"Everyone is speaking of democracy and freedom but the reality on the ground is different," he said, adding that it's difficult for him to encourage families in his diocese to stay.

Finally, there's a fourth frame suggested by Jesuit Fr. Samir Khalil Samir, an Egyptian scholar based at St. Joseph University in Beirut: extolling Lebanon itself as a model for the Islamic future, one based on moderation, religious freedom and freedom of conscience.

When John Paul II visited Lebanon in May 1997, he declared that the small Arab nation, composed of a patchwork of 17 different religious confessions, is a "message."

Picking up that idea, Samir published an essay Tuesday in advance of the pope's trip pointing out that Lebanon is the only country in the Middle East where a citizen can convert from one religion to another "without the risk of being killed or severely marginalized."

Lebanon still recalls, Samir wrote, the example of Fr. Afif Osseiran, who came from a prominent Lebanese Shi'ite family and who converted to the Maronite church in communion with Rome, the country's dominant Christian tradition, after reading the Sermon on the Mount. Osseiran died 25 years ago, Samir wrote, and still today his entire family, Muslims included, takes part in an annual Mass in his memory.

"What is possible in Lebanon is totally impossible in the rest of the world," Samir wrote.

This was Samir's bottom line: "Lebanon as a multiethnic and multireligious country, open to all traditions, is to some extent an ideal for the Arab Spring, [one] that dreams of a secular state, open to all religious and cultural traditions."

Which one of those frames looms largest during Benedict's three days in Lebanon may well determine the extent to which observers color the trip a success after the fact.

This will be Benedict XVI's 24th international trip, and his fourth to the Middle East after previous outings to Turkey in 2006, the Holy Land (Jordan, Israel and the Palestinian Territories) in 2009 and Cyprus in 2010.

As he has in the past, Lombardi insisted it has "never been under discussion" to cancel the trip, despite security concerns related to the deteriorating situation in neighboring Syria. Lombardi said the trip is a sign of the pope's "desire" to visit the region, to offer a "message of peace" and a "sign of hope."

In an interview with Reuters on Monday, Archbishop Gabriele Caccia, the papal ambassador in Lebanon, said he is "as tranquil as humanly possible" about the pope's security, and the church had been given "reasonable guarantees" the trip would not be disrupted.

Among other things, Caccia said a delegation from Hezbollah, a Shi'ite military faction that is also a political party in Lebanon, recently visited the Maronite patriarch and "expressed joy" over the pope's visit.

While in Lebanon, Benedict XVI is scheduled to visit the headquarters of the four major Catholic churches in the country (the Maronites, the Greek Melkites, the Armenian Catholics, and the Syriac Catholics), as well as with leaders of other Christian denominations and representatives of the four major branches of Islam in Lebanon (Sunnis, Shi'ites, Druze, and Alawites.)

Facing the inevitable question in light of the recent arrest of the pope's butler, Lombardi said Benedict's personal assistant on the Lebanon trip will be Sandro Mariotti, a married layman with two children, who has replaced Paolo Gabriele, the former majordomo charged with being the mole at the heart of the leaks scandal.

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