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In Lebanon, pope mixes bitter and sweet

by John L. Allen Jr.

All Things Catholic

In advance, Benedict XVI's three-day trip to Lebanon shaped up as a balancing act, both reaching out and pushing back -- that is, extending an olive branch to the Muslim majority of both Lebanon and the entire Middle East, while at the same time defending its beleaguered Christian minority and rejecting the radical currents in Islam which exploded anew this week with violence in Egypt, Libya and elsewhere.

Day one of the trip didn't disappoint, with Benedict offering a mixture of the bitter and the sweet. I'm in Beirut covering the trip, arriving early this afternoon aboard the papal plane.

During a 13-minute session with reporters on the plane, Benedict declared the Arab Spring "a positive thing," the first time he's issued such a judgment. It came despite the fact that some Christian leaders in the Middle East see the 'Arab Spring' as a potential winter, heralding a transition from police states that grudgingly tolerated Christians to Islamic theocracies which actively persecute them.

The Arab Spring, Benedict said, reflects a desire "for greater democracy, for greater liberty, greater cooperation and a renewed Arab identity." The implication, seemingly, was that Christians shouldn't be afraid of it.

Benedict also noted that Christians aren't the only ones fleeing the current civil war in Syria, but that Muslims too are victimized by it. In some of his strongest language condemning the arms trade, he called the importing of weapons a "grave sin," and also called on Muslims and Christians to "dialogue together" in the search for a peaceful solution.

Although the Vatican has been pressing for tighter controls on the global arms trade for years, and the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace issued a document on the subject in 1994, this is apparently the first time a pope has called the importing of arms a "grave sin."

More locally, Benedict used his welcome address at Beirut's Rafik Hariri Airport to extol Lebanon's "harmony and gentleness" and its "celebrated equilibrium", extolling the Mediterranean state of 4 million as a "model to the inhabitants of the whole region and the entire world."

Such praise reflects Lebanon's penchant for striking a balance among 18 different religious groups, including a Christian minority of roughly 40 percent -- though, of course, it overlooks the civil war that gripped the country from 1975 to 1991.

Certainly Lebanon seemed to return the pope's graciousness. Even Hezbollah, seen in the West as a terrorist organization but which functions here as a political and social movement, got in on the act, erecting a banner along the pope's route in from the airport welcoming him in French "to the country of co-existence." (Another banner, in Arabic, welcomed Benedict to "the country of resistance," generally a reference to perceived Israeli hegemony.)

Despite the overall conciliatory touch, Benedict didn't shrink from flinging down a few gauntlets.

One came for his Christian hosts, with Benedict asking them "to continue to hope" and asking them "not to leave" the Middle East and "not to sell their possessions."

That plea comes against the backdrop of a decades-long decline in the Christian presence in the region. One estimate holds that from 12 million today, the Christian population will drop to 6 million in 2020.

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Most challenges the pope offered, however, seemed focused outside -- especially at the socially dominant tradition across most of the Middle East, Islam, though much of what he had to say could also be applied in Israel as well.

The pope insisted that the estimated 6 million Christians across the Middle East, representing roughly 5 percent of the population, must enjoy "full citizenship" and not be treated as "second-class citizens or believers."

The pope also demanded that everyone must have the right to freely choose their own religion, and to practice it publicly, "without endangering one's life."

He said the time has come "to move beyond tolerance to religious freedom."

Further, the pope seemed to link the deprival of religious liberty to Christian flight from the Middle East, warning that the long-standing decline in the region's Christian footprint means "human, cultural, and religious impoverishment."

"A Middle East without Christians, or with only a few Christians, would no longer be the Middle East," the pope said, calling on political leaders to avoid the advent of a "monochromatic Middle East" without religious diversity.

That language came in a document titled *Ecclesia in Medio Oriente* ("The Church in the Middle East"), representing the conclusions of a 2010 Synod of Bishops in Rome on the Middle East. The pope signed that document, known as an apostolic exhortation, during a ceremony in a Greek Melkite basilica in Beirut this evening.

Benedict insisted that religious freedom is not an idea unique to Christianity, or a ploy by Christians to impose their values.

"It is wrong to claim that these rights are only 'Christian' human rights," the pontiff said. "They are nothing less than the rights demanded by the dignity of each human person and of each citizen, whatever his or her origins, religious convictions and political preferences."

Calling religious freedom "the pinnacle of all other freedoms," Benedict warned that denying or suppressing it "gives rise to religious and political exploitation" and "discrimination and violence, leading to death."

Though the pope didn't point to specific instances or specific nations, examples of his point aren't difficult to find. In Pakistan, for instance, a 14-year-old mentally disabled girl was recently arrested for allegedly burning pages from a Qur'an, triggering a violent anti-Christian pogrom that left 600 homeless; in Iran, an Evangelical pastor was recently convicted of the crime of trying to convert people from Islam and sentenced to time served.

In a similar vein, Benedict had harsh words for religious fundamentalism, which he blasted as "a violent fundamentalism claiming to be based on religion." Saying that fundamentalism "indiscriminately and fatally affects believers of all religions," Benedict argued for a "healthy secularity" in which religion and politics are distinct but not at odds.

The early verdict seemed to be that Benedict's blend of bitter and sweet was working.

While much of the Middle East was gripped by anti-American ferment, Lebanon, at least the area around Beirut, seemed a relative oasis of tranquility. A local newspaper noted that political infighting had declined, the government had "renewed dynamism," and the army had succeeded in pacifying regions south of Beirut where powerful ethnic clans had finally accepted its authority.

All that could be simple coincidence, according to *L'Orient-le jour*, a leading Lebanese daily -- or, the paper said, it could be "a papal miracle."

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The 86-page *Ecclesia in Medio Oriente* is styled as a blueprint for the future of the church across the region. Beyond its treatment of religious freedom, the following are a few other highlights.

First, Benedict XVI expresses sorrow "to see this blessed land suffer in its children who relentlessly tear one another to pieces and die." He writes that the new Christian martyrs of the region, who belong to all churches and denominations, represent a powerful ecumenical impulse -- "living witnesses of untrammelled unity in the glorified Christ, a foretaste of our being 'gathered together' as a people finally reconciled in him," he writes.

Second, Benedict endorses the broader quest for Christian unity. Among other things, he encourages *communicatio in sacris*, or sharing of the sacraments between Catholics and other churches of the East, in the case of the sacraments of penance, the Eucharist, and anointing of the sick. He also endorses the idea of a common translation of the Lord's Prayer in the languages of the region, as well as common Bible study.

He also expresses hope that the day may come soon when the different Christian churches can reach agreement on common recognition of baptism, and when they'll be able to receive communion together.

Third, Benedict applauds efforts at interfaith dialogue, especially with Judaism and Islam. He calls the Western culture forged by Jewish and Christian traditions a "noble alloy," and also says that Christians have been usefully challenged by Muslim "devotion and piety."

Fourth, Benedict calls for greater attention to new migrants to the region, who are often, he said, "victims of violations of local laws and international conventions."

A disproportionate share of these new migrants to the Middle East, who are often concentrated in the Gulf States, are Christians from nations such as the Philippines, Korea, Vietnam and Nigeria. Estimates are that there are almost 1 million Catholics today in Saudi Arabia alone, overwhelmingly composed of these foreign workers in the domestic services and oil industries.

"Native and immigrant Catholics together," the pope writes, "constitute the current reality of Catholicism in the region."

Fifth, Benedict picks up a frequently voiced concern during the 2010 synod: "careful management of personnel and the church's resources," including the need for "a serious audit of finances and holdings in order to avoid any possible confusion between personal and church property."

During the synod, several observers of the church in the Middle East warned that some officials treated church assets as if it was their personal property, risking a serious misallocation of resources.

Sixth, Benedict endorses a stronger role for women, and greater protection of their rights, both in civil and political life and in the church.

"I want to assure all women that the Catholic church, in fidelity to God's plan, works to advance women's personal dignity and equality with men in response to the wide variety of forms of discrimination which they experience," the pope writes.

"I believe that women should play, and be allowed to play, a greater part in public and ecclesial life," he said.

As part of that picture, Benedict insists that church courts in the Middle East must give equal weight to the testimony of women, as part of a "more sound and fair implementation of church law."

Seventh, Benedict calls for a revival in Biblical studies and devotion, including the idea of an annual Bible week.

Eighth, Benedict praises the educational, health care and social service institutions operated by the Catholic church in the Middle East, and calls for public support of those institutions.

Ninth, Benedict proposes greater attention to the fathers of the church in catechesis and spiritual formation, part of a broad effort to recover the distinctive patrimony of the Eastern churches.

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Finally, day one of the Lebanon trip also afforded the Vatican an opportunity to get past a fairly embarrassing diplomatic and PR sequence of the past 48 hours, which one might call the "tale of two statements."

On Wednesday, the Vatican issued a statement regarding the anti-American violence in Egypt and Libya which seemed, at least to some observers, to come awfully close to excusing it. The Vatican spokesman,

Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi, described the attacks as the "tragic results" of "unjustified offense and provocations" against Muslim sensitivities -- referring to the anti-Islamic American film cited by the Muslim protestors.

"Profound respect for the beliefs, texts, outstanding figures and symbols of the various religions are an essential precondition for the peaceful coexistence of peoples," Lombardi said.

American Catholic commentator Philip Lawler publicly described that statement as "outrageous," and privately Western diplomats in Rome made their disappointment clear to Vatican officials.

Lombardi's Wednesday statement did refer to "unacceptable" violence, but there was no clear indication of regret for the death of Ambassador Christopher Stevens or the other American officials killed during an attack on the U.S. consulate in Benghazi, Libya.

The next day, Lombardi issued a second statement expressing "the firmest possible condemnation on the part of the Holy See" for the American deaths in Libya.

Nothing can justify the activity of terrorist organizations and homicidal violence," he said.

On background, Vatican officials said that Wednesday's statement had been drafted before the American deaths in Libya were confirmed, and said that it was primarily intended to address Muslim outrage about the film, reiterating the Vatican's longstanding position that an attack against one religious community is an assault on them all.

Obviously, officials said, the Vatican does not condone terrorist violence, whatever the pretext.

Nonetheless, many diplomats and other observers expressed dismay over the contrast in tone between the two statements, suggesting it would have been better to wait. The points made about respecting religious sensitivities, they argued, could have been included after a condemnation of violence and expression of sympathy for the victims.

In any event, the Vatican seemed to get lucky in that the contretemps occurred just before the pope's departure for Lebanon, meaning that it has been overshadowed to some extent by Benedict's presence in the Middle East.

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