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The pope's freedom and his Achille's heel

John L. Allen Jr. | Jun. 10, 2006 All Things Catholic

One thing about Benedict XVI which, by now, ought to be abundantly clear is that he is very much his own man. As I have written before, this is not a "PC" pope. He does not feel constrained by other people's expectations.

It's not that Benedict is an innovator. In fact, his exercise of the papal office is in many ways far more traditional than that of his predecessor, John Paul II, who made a career out of shattering antique norms. (Being pope, for example, used to mean never having to say you're sorry, while John Paul apologized repeatedly for all manner of past failings of the church).

Yet at 79, with nothing left to prove, never facing reelection, and carrying an enormous burden he never sought, Benedict exhibits a remarkable interior freedom by the standards of major world leaders.

Cultural norms of the Vatican, for example, dictated that an American could not become prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, yet Cardinal William Levada is there anyway; Vatican diplomatic logic held that Joseph Zen of Hong Kong should not be made a cardinal in order to avoid irritating the Chinese, since Zen is the biggest thorn in their side on the religious freedom issue, yet Zen is now wearing the scarlet. Powerful political pressures suggested delay or inaction on the case of Fr. Marcial Maciel Degollado, founder of the Legionaries of Christ, yet Benedict nevertheless imposed sanctions.

As if it were needed, further proof of the point came during Benedict's Sunday visit to Auschwitz.

When a prominent German Catholic visits Auschwitz, there's a certain script that person is expected to follow. One should acknowledge German complicity in the Holocaust, and in some sense ask forgiveness; pledge to fight modern anti-Semitism; and avoid opening old wounds, such as controversies over Edith Stein or the presence of a Carmelite convent near Auschwitz. On Sunday, Benedict utterly disregarded the script -- he defended virtuous Germans who resisted the Nazis, ignored the issue of anti-Semitism, and praised both Stein and the Carmelites.

Benedict did so, at least in his own mind, because he had a deeper point to make. He came to say that Auschwitz represents the most terrifying example of a more general tendency in human psychology, which is the desire to slay God as the final limit on human power.

Either we see the world as a gift from God, Benedict suggested, with a moral law that regulates what we can do to one another, or the only reality is human power. If that's the world, Benedict argued, sooner or later it ends in Auschwitz -- as well as Rwanda, Bosnia, and all the other monuments to arrogance and hatred that mar human history.

That's the message Benedict wanted to deliver, and both his greatest strength and his Achille's heel are that

nothing on earth was going to stop him from doing so.

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From a communications point of view, the pope's Achille's heel is that by refusing to satisfy prevailing expectations, Benedict can sometimes send the wrong signal to people who, quite naturally, interpret his words and deeds through the prism of those expectations.

Thus by neglecting to say anything about anti-Semitism, and by avoiding the complicity of ordinary Germans, Benedict seemed to some observers to be "rolling back" post-Second Vatican Council gains in the Catholic church on relations with Judaism and the church's capacity for self-criticism.

"It's symbolically important that Pope Benedict went to Auschwitz, but I was expecting a different speech," said Abraham Foxman of the Anti-Defamation League, noting that the pope did not expressly condemn anti-Semitism.

"At Auschwitz, of all places, Benedict might have referred to the biblical and Catholic roots of European anti-Semitism," Oliver Kamm wrote in *The Times* of London. "He preferred to concentrate on the heroism of Catholic witnesses against Nazism. The picture he gave was thereby highly misleading."

Perhaps the most intemperate comment came from Sever Plocker in Ynetnews.

"Pope Benedict XVI's visit to Auschwitz was a historical, human and moral failure," Plocker wrote afterwards. "He arrived in a black, armored, German car, gave an objectionable speech filled with smooth words like 'reconciliation' and 'understanding,' prayed to Jesus, failed to ask forgiveness for the crimes committed by his people, and got back in his black, armored, German car and drove back to Rome."

"The visit was extraneous, annoying and infuriating. The German pope failed to do the most basic thing he should have done at Auschwitz: He failed to kneel next to the ovens, look to the blue skies of the Auschwitz afternoon and ask forgiveness for the murder of six million Jews, in the name of German or the German Catholic church."

Privately, Israeli sources made it clear on Monday that they were disappointed in several aspects of Benedict's Auschwitz visit.

Vatican sources strenuously rejected suggestions that Benedict's "silence" on anti-Semitism should be read as a step backwards in papal leadership on the issue.

In his Wednesday General Audience, Benedict spelled out what he left unsaid on Sunday:

"Auschwitz must not be forgotten, and the other 'factories of death' in which the Nazi regime tried to eliminate God in order to take his place!" the pope said. "We must not cede to the temptation of racial hatred, which is at the origins of the worst forms of anti-Semitism!"

With respect to Plocker's comments, it's true that a black car dropped the pope off outside the famous *Arbeit Macht Frei*, but he walked on foot through the gate and down the main lane of the camp in order to arrive at the Wall of Death, keeping his entourage at a healthy distance behind. After praying before the wall, he moved slowly down a line of survivors, hearing their stories and, in the case of one Jewish survivor, exchanging kisses on the cheek.

Perhaps a bit like Kennedy's famous debate with Nixon, people who saw Benedict's visit on television probably

had a more positive impression that those who simply read the text -- because in the context of his body language, facial gestures, and the time he took with each person he met, it seemed clear Benedict was moved by the experience.

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