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Benedict in Bavaria

by John L. Allen Jr.

All Things Catholic

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Aside from the fracas over Islam, Benedict has actually once again shown himself to be a figure singularly uninterested in grabbing headlines. In face of a rebellious Catholic community in Germany, Benedict might have used the occasion to issue a stern call to order, but he did nothing of the sort. Neither did he engage in much public breast-beating over general European declines in faith and practice. Nor did Benedict follow the model of John Paul II by going personal, using the details of his own biography to underscore points or openly letting his emotions flow.

Instead, in his public messages Benedict focused largely on the pastoral basics. Consider these words, addressed to German parents:

Please, go with your children to church and take part in the Sunday Eucharistic celebration! ? Sunday becomes more beautiful, the whole week becomes more beautiful, when you go to Sunday Mass together. And please, pray together at home too: at meals and before going to bed. Prayer does not only bring us nearer to God but also nearer to one another.

As we have seen during his other public voyages, this is Benedict the pastor at work. For the most part, he avoids theological speculation or hard-hitting political commentary, striving instead to speak to the

immediate spiritual needs of ordinary people.

I wrote in Poland that when Benedict travels he has an intended audience in mind, and it certainly isn't the press corps. The Italian daily *Corriere della Sera* tried to profile it statistically on Tuesday, using the results of a recent poll on religious practice in Italy . (In general terms, the findings have parallels pretty much everywhere in the West).

The survey found that more than 90 percent of Italians describe themselves as Catholic, while just 25 percent go to Mass on a weekly basis. Twenty percent never go at all, and the remainder are clumped somewhere in the middle.

These in-betweeners still think of themselves as Catholic, still recognize the church as a moral and spiritual point of reference, but to varying degrees have drifted away from regular practice of the faith. They have a Catholic background, according to the poll, but are moving in the direction of progressive secularization.

That broad middle people not instinctively hostile to the church, but not wild about it either represents, according to *Corriere*, Benedict's potential market. His strategy seems to be to speak in positive tones about the Christian message, avoiding giving headline writers occasions to fashion banners along the lines of, "Pope condemns x". He's also offering a back to basics message, focusing on scripture, the church fathers, the devotional life and the sacraments, proposing that they offer the best way to satisfy post-modernity's need for meaning.

His gambit seems to be that by not feeding "the beast" -- to use the language of Washington about giving the media juicy sound-bites -- he can do an end-run around the normal filters of the secular press, allowing the natural categories of the Christian faith to fashion the discussion. The question, of course, is whether anyone outside the 25 percent of Catholics who are basically already with the pope, and who probably constitute the bulk of the crowds who have turned out in Bavaria to see him, will actually hear it.

On that front, only time will tell.

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One other point from the Regensburg lecture.

Benedict documented three stages in what he called the attempt at "dehellenization" of Christianity, meaning the effort to strip it of its Greco-Roman heritage and return it to a state of "pure faith," which could be re-expressed in different cultural forms in other parts of the world. The stages are the Reformation, the liberal theology of the 19th and 20th century, and the current push for "cultural pluralism."

The pope referred to the argument for "dehellenization" as "not only false," but "coarse and lacking in precision."

"True, there are elements in the evolution of the early Church which do not have to be integrated into all cultures," he said. "Nonetheless, the fundamental decisions made about the relationship between faith and the use of human reason are part of the faith itself; they are developments consonant with the nature of faith itself."

This is a point with potential importance for the issue of "inculturation," or calls for Christianity to be shaped by the local cultures in which it finds itself. The debate is usually most intense in the developing world, where some theologians suggest that Christianity's European modes of expressions should be set aside to allow a genuinely African, or Asian, or Latin American form of the faith to emerge.

In the past, Benedict has argued that the term "inculturation" is imprecise, because it suggests that a pure faith comes into contact with a historically conditioned culture. The better term, he has suggested, is "inter-culturation," because Christianity itself is a culture. Some aspects of its Greco-Roman and European inheritance, Benedict has said, cannot simply be cast aside.

The choice in favor of reason would, judging from the Regensburg address, be one example of what the pope has in mind.

What all this suggests is that Benedict will judge calls for liturgical adaptation, for example, or "African theology" with caution.

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