

Benedict's gamble with Islam

John L. Allen Jr. | Oct. 12, 2006 All Things Catholic

NOTE: Beginning today, my weekly column has been retooled as a shorter and more analytical look at a single issue. Throughout the week, I'm posting news items as daily updates, which appear at johnallen.ncrcafe.org[1]. My suggestion would be to bookmark johnallen.ncrcafe.org[1] and to check regularly for the latest news and analysis.

Pope Benedict XVI heads to Turkey next month, his first visit to a majority Muslim state. Of all the question marks surrounding the trip, perhaps the most consequential is this: Which Benedict will show up?

Will it be the Benedict of Regensburg, challenging his Muslim hosts to embrace rationality, hence to renounce violence and to respect religious freedom? Or will it be the post-Regensburg Benedict, seemingly determined to project a "kinder, gentler" face to Islam, missing no opportunity to send signals of reconciliation?

Can he, in some fashion, be both?

The picture may come quickly into focus on an island off Istanbul, where the storied Orthodox seminary of Halki sits shuttered for 35 years by order of the Turkish government. Halki has become a global emblem of the "reciprocity" issue, meaning the tendency of Islamic states to deny their minorities the same freedoms that Muslims receive in the West.

What -- if anything -- the pope chooses to say about Halki will therefore reveal a great deal about the temper of his trip.

For 162 years, Halki is where future generations of clergy trained for the Patriarch of Constantinople, "first among equals" in the Orthodox world. Some 330 of the seminary's 950 graduates have become bishops, archbishops or patriarchs, and its renowned library contains 60,000 volumes, some dating to the 15th century.

In 1971, however, it was closed along with all university-level religious schools as part of a secularizing campaign. Recently Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan was on the verge of allowing Halki to reopen, but he backtracked, despite a tough new European Union report citing the seminary's situation among key human rights problems in Turkey.

The official logic is that the government couldn't open the seminary without tolerating radical Islamist schools, but that's widely viewed as a smokescreen. The reality is that Turkish nationalists with deep anti-Greek resentments don't want Halki to reopen, seeing it as an unwanted reminder of the country's Byzantine Christian past.

Metropolitan Apostolos, abbot of the Halki monastery, recently put the situation this way: "We're not second-

class citizens here, we're third-class. Minorities had more freedom to practice their religion in the Ottoman Empire."

Logically, there are three reasons why one would expect Benedict to issue a forceful challenge on the seminary.

First, the official reason for the trip is to visit the Patriarch of Constantinople, and it would be a welcome ecumenical gesture for Benedict to speak up on behalf of the beleaguered Orthodox community. Second, it would also illustrate that the pope's defense of "reciprocity" is not just about protecting narrowly Catholic interests. Third, Halki Seminary seems a perfect example of what Benedict's now-famous lecture in Regensburg was intended to critique, i.e., an irrational use of compulsion in a way that fails to respect human dignity.

Yet looking around Rome this week, the order of the day instead seems to be to send every possible signal of deference to Islamic sensibilities. Four examples:

- Footnotes to Benedict's Sept. 12 speech at Regensburg were posted on the Vatican Web site. In his footnote to the quotation from a Byzantine emperor that sparked the crisis, Benedict writes: "In the Muslim world, this quotation has unfortunately been taken as an expression of my personal position, thus arousing understandable indignation. I hope that the reader can see immediately that this sentence does not express my personal view of the Quran ?."
- Wednesday's issue of L'Osservatore Romano carried a front page box with a message from Benedict XVI on peace and tolerance, addressed to an Istanbul conference. Notably, even though the conference is a three-way meeting of Jews, Muslims and Christians, the L'Osservatore headline was, "Sincere dialogue and reciprocal respect between Christians and Muslims."
- Also on Wednesday, Secretary of State Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, a Salesian, celebrated Mass at the Salesian University. He said that dialogue with Islam "helps to re-propose God as a point of reference, to avoid exiling him from human life and from society." li >
- In a Thursday session with the Jewish Anti-Defamation League, without any Muslims present, Benedict nevertheless made a point of saying: "Jews, Christians and Muslims share many common convictions, and there are numerous areas of humanitarian and social engagement in which we can and must cooperate."

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Compounding this desire to restore calm is a strong undercurrent of anxiety about the possibility of terrorist retaliation for the pope's Regensburg remarks. One senior Western diplomat told me this week that Western intelligence agencies are convinced that sooner or later there will be a strike in Rome, whether against St. Peter's or a secondary target such as one of the major basilicas. The diplomat said for now there are no specific threats, but Vatican officials are obviously aware of the risk.

The most ardent advocates of "reciprocity" hope that Benedict will not be muzzled or intimidated by all this. On the contrary, they would like to see Benedict fling down a gauntlet in Turkey, similar to Ronald Reagan's famous challenge to Mikhail Gorbachev to "tear down that wall."

In their minds' eye, they dream of Benedict XVI facing the Turkish prime minister and insisting, "Mr. Erdogan, reopen that seminary!"

As with the fall of the Berlin Wall, the best-case scenario is that reopening Halki could set off a chain reaction of similar breakthroughs in other Muslim nations, collectively transforming the situation for Christians and other religious minorities.

Benedict has said he wants a frank and sincere dialogue with Islam, and such a historic challenge in Istanbul

would certainly fit the bill. In order to do that, however, the pope will have to set aside the Vatican's post-Regensburg, kid-gloves etiquette -- a significant gamble, given all that's at stake, but one with a payoff that arguably justifies rolling the dice.

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