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Who will say no to Benedict XVI?

John L. Allen Jr. | Oct. 27, 2006 All Things Catholic

All Things Catholic by John L. Allen, Jr.

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Of all the questions generated by the Regensburg crisis, perhaps the one of greatest long-term consequence for this pontificate, across a range of issues much wider than Catholic-Muslim relations, is the following.

Who will say no to Benedict XVI?

It's a question only now coming into view, as the immediate need for damage control with the Muslim world, and for finalizing the agenda for the pope's Nov. 28-Dec. 1 trip to Turkey, recedes.

I've just returned from two weeks in Rome, "taking the temperature," so to speak, of the post-Regensburg climate. Speaking on background, virtually every Vatican official I saw offered some version of the following analysis:

The point Benedict made in Regensburg about reason and faith needing each other is an urgent one, and he was both right and courageous to flag it as a special challenge for Islam today. Extreme reactions in some parts of the Islamic world actually confirmed his argument. In the end, the tumult at least put the question on the table. Nevertheless, Benedict's citation of a Byzantine emperor's polemical remarks about Mohammad could have been more nuanced. Had it been, some of the violence that resulted -- including attacks against Christian churches and, perhaps, the slaying of an Italian nun in Somalia -- might have been avoided.

One senior Vatican official put it to me this way: "Had he just inserted a single phrase, saying clearly, ?This does not reflect my personal opinion,' it would have been a different story."

All of which begs the obvious question: Why didn't somebody who had read the speech in advance urge him to do just that?

At least eight people saw the Regensburg address before its delivery: Cardinal Angelo Sodano, the then-Secretary of State; Archbishop Leonardo Sandri, the "substitute" in the State Secretariat; Archbishop Paolo Sardi, who coordinates the production of papal texts in the State Secretariat; Fr. Federico Lombardi, the Vatican spokesperson; Monsignor Georg Gänswein, the pope's private secretary; and the translators. I don't know what any of them might have said to Benedict, but obviously it did not change the outcome.

It's not that Benedict is closed to such counsel. A parallel case from his trip last May to Poland makes the point.

Then-Vatican spokesperson Joaquin Navarro-Valls read the text of Benedict's May 28 speech at Auschwitz the day before its delivery, and noted that the pope did not use the Hebrew word *Shoah* in reference to the Holocaust. Fearing that its absence might be taken as a slight, Navarro-Valls sought out the pope, interrupting him at prayer, in order to suggest that *Shoah* be inserted.

According to an official who witnessed the exchange, Benedict responded positively, asking, "Where do you think it should go?" In the end, he thanked Navarro-Valls for the suggestion, and added a phrase to the speech with the term *Shoah*.

I happened to be standing among Jewish dignitaries at Auschwitz before Benedict arrived, and spoke with Jerzy Kluger, longtime Jewish friend of Pope John Paul II. Kluger had heard about the addition, and said it would be of help to voices in the Jewish world committed to dialogue with Christianity.

"It shows he's trying," Kluger said.

The insertion certainly did not prevent criticism of the Auschwitz speech by those who felt it didn't go far enough, but it was nevertheless an important gesture of sensitivity.

This example leads me to believe that had Benedict been offered similar advice by someone he trusts prior to Regensburg, he probably would have taken it.

To be fair, Regensburg fell during a time of transition, in which the possibility for this sort of intervention was limited. Sodano's departure had already been announced, and his replacement, Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, had not yet arrived. Navarro-Valls had been replaced by Lombardi, who was just beginning to get a feel for the job.

Moreover, because Benedict XVI wrote the speech himself, there was no before-the-fact "vetting" that might occur with texts in which several hands are involved.

Beyond these circumstances, there are at least two other reasons why it's always difficult to "rein in" the pope.

First, those who work in the Holy See understand themselves to be at the service of the pope, and hence they're constitutionally disinclined to "correct" him. The idea is to enter into the pope's mind, not to try to "spin" him. Second, this pope in particular is held in such intellectual awe that there's an even greater psychological reluctance to challenge him; one Vatican official this week laughed and then said, it would feel like Emperor Joseph II saying to Mozart that his score contains "too many notes."

Yet at the end of the day, even -- perhaps especially -- a pope needs a trusted confidante with the capacity to say, "You're wrong," or "You can't say this." The idea is not to prevent the pope from being himself, but precisely to help him achieve his own objectives.

Within the circle of those closest to Benedict, a few figures loom as the most likely candidates for this function: Bertone, the new Secretary of State; Bishop Josef Clemens, Secretary of the Pontifical Council for the Laity and former private secretary to then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger; Gänswein, the current private secretary; and whoever may succeed Sandri as the "substitute," traditionally the pope's right arm in day-to-day church affairs.

There are questions marks about each.

Some worry that Bertone lacks diplomatic background, and they wonder if he has the sensitivity it would have required to see the post-Regensburg reaction coming. Yet he has pastoral experience from his Salesian formation, as well as his four years as bishop of Vercelli and three as archbishop of Genoa. During his years at the congregation, he was a loyal Ratzinger lieutenant, but he also had his own mind. Sources say that during the Wednesday *feria quarta* meetings, when the cardinal members of the congregation and the superiors go over cases, the custom was for Ratzinger to make a presentation first, the other cardinals to speak in turn, and then the secretary last. Normally, sources say, Bertone supported Ratzinger's position, but there were a few occasions when he forcefully argued for a different approach, and Ratzinger always seemed open to his points.

Gänswein does not have the same father/son relationship with Benedict that Cardinal Stanislaw Dziwisz had with John Paul II, yet time and proximity to the pope will make him a steadily more authoritative figure. Clemens maintains a close bond with Benedict, occasionally arranging dinners on his own initiative for longtime friends and other guests with the pope. The new "substitute" remains a wild card.

Unfortunately, we won't know until much later the extent to which any of these figures, or someone else, steps into the role of filling the pope's blind spots, given that their impact will be measured largely in things that don't happen. The fact that there's no applause to be won, however, doesn't make the task any less important -- especially with a pope whose intellect every now and then needs to be leavened by a dash of sensitivity to public reception, and the realities of modern sound-bite media coverage.

During one of those infamous Roman lunches, a John Paul II intimate recently put it to me this way, speaking about Benedict's inner circle: "I hope there's somebody who will have the courage to say, ?If you give the order, I'll do what you want immediately. But I'm obligated in conscience to tell you that it's a mistake.'"

That's a tough thing to say to any boss, and above all to a man regarded as the Vicar of Christ on earth. Regensburg illustrates, however, that every so often, somebody has to do it.

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