

Pope Benedict in Turkey: A Moment of Grace

Pope Benedict XVI's pilgrimage to Turkey was a highly providential event.

The news media obsessed on his controversial statement in September regarding Mohammed and Islamic violence, and on the protests taking place. But the Lord had so much more to accomplish during the Pope's brief visit. Far from being damage-control, this encounter between the leaders of the three major religions went to the heart of their relationships.

Some of the earliest Christian churches were established in Turkey. In Ephesus, the Mother of Jesus Christ is believed to have lived. Orthodox Christians have worshiped in what is now Istanbul since 324AD, when Constantine moved his headquarters to the city that bore his name. There, Christian crusaders sacked Constantinople in 1204, 160 years after the mutual excommunication of the chief patriarchs of the East and the West.

In 1054 the Schism between the Western Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches formalized a long-standing split between the Greek and Latin worlds. That was when Pope Leo IX and Patriarch Michael Cerularius exchanged anathemas of excommunication. Revoked only recently, this fracture in Christianity would be echoed five hundred years later in the Reformation, when western Christianity began to break apart.

Pope Benedict XVI celebrated Mass in a shrine dedicated to Mary, the Mother of God. She is revered not only by the Orthodox and Catholics but as well by Muslims. On Thursday, he joined the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I on the feast of St. Andrew, patron of the Orthodox. "The divisions which exist among Christians are a scandal to the world," the pope said afterwards, recalling the Apostle who preached across Asia Minor, and who tradition says ordained the first bishop of Constantinople.

Andrew, significantly, was the brother of St. Peter, who was martyred in Rome and is considered the first pope. In a joint statement, Benedict and Bartholomew stressed the need to "preserve Christian roots" in European culture while remaining "open to other religions and their cultural contributions." This statement demonstrated the deepening solidarity of two Christian traditions which still face great challenges from the outside.

And between Mary's shrine and the Orthodox Divine Liturgy, which predate Islam, respectively, by six and three centuries, Pope Benedict XVI visited the Blue Mosque. Having in September publicly questioned what Islam has contributed to the world of religion that wasn't already available in Christianity or Judaism, he now removed his shoes and prayed quietly.

Having questioned whether Islam's roots were not inextricably entangled in violence and warfare, perhaps the Pope was now reflecting on the long, un-Christ-like entanglement of western Christianity in innumerable forms of violence. Worshipping the One God in Constantinople, he no doubt winced at the thought of what Catholic crusaders had done to the beautiful city. And welcomed into the most famous Muslim place of worship in Turkey, he doubtless felt the presence of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. As a scholar, he must have been remembering how the Arab world preserved the works and legacy of Aristotle, making possible the most significant breakthrough in medieval theology, in the works of St. Thomas Aquinas. And this was only one element of the scientific legacy of Islam.

Benedict's visit to the temples of Orthodoxy and Islam in what once was Constantinople might also have tested him in another great burden which he carries as the chief shepherd of the Catholic Church. John Paul II, his beloved predecessor, had made every effort to extend the hand of mutual respect and reconciliation in his relationship with Orthodoxy and Islam. In May of 2001, just before his 81st birthday, he had made his moving gesture of repentance in Athens: "for the occasions past and present when the sons and daughters of the Catholic Church have sinned by actions and omissions against their Orthodox brothers and sisters." As the first pope to visit Greece since long before the Great Schism and the first, also, to enter a mosque, John Paul II has been criticized by many for having gone too far.

Has Benedict gone too far, either in his previous comments on Islam or in his recent efforts in Turkey? I think that the vast majority of us are unable to answer this question. What is happening is part of a process guided by the Spirit and ordained by God. We are witnessing the unfolding of a great mystery. I believe that those who have been touched by the effort of these two great men, John Paul and Benedict, will see the benefits of their work in the ever-growing recognition that we, together with the Jews, share one common origin and one God and Father of us all. One day, whatever wars and agonies intervene, we will also recognize and serve the only Messiah.

Written Thursday, Nov. 30th, by Fr. Dean McFalls, Our Lady of Guadalupe Parish.