

Benedict's visit: The pope's agenda

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Benedict XVI has a reputation as a blunt, rigorous teacher of doctrine, so it was perhaps surprising that the highlight of his much publicized visit to the U.S. was an unexpected private pastoral act—his meeting with people who had been sexually abused by Catholic priests. The pope's willingness to listen to some of the painful stories behind the churchwide scandal and to look into victims' eyes was a pastoral gesture that softened the image of this scholarly man. His act illustrated a larger truth: listening to others' stories is not only a powerful form of ministry but one that makes more credible the public acts of preaching and teaching.

Yet the teacher Benedict was also much in evidence. The upheavals of the post-Vatican II church have made him especially concerned with defending the "objective" truth of Catholic tradition against what he sees as subjective or skeptical philosophies and false notions of pluralism. This agenda, often characterized as conservative, in fact plays out in ways that move both left and right. For example, at the United Nations he offered a vigorous defense of human rights based on "objective foundations" and "unchanging justice," and he even supported interventions by the international community when a particular country fails to protect human rights. He also made a vigorous defense of the UN itself—an institution frequently maligned by neoconservatives in the U.S. For Benedict, the UN is "an example of how issues and conflicts concerning the world community can be subjected to common regulation," and he implicitly critiqued the U.S. unilateral action in Iraq, noting that the UN is "all the more necessary at a time when we experience the obvious paradox of a multilateral consensus that continues to be in crisis because it is still subordinate to the decision of a few."

The blunt teacher was also in evidence in the pope's remarks to ecumenical leaders. He moved quickly to points of disagreement. He complained that "fundamental Christian beliefs and practices are sometimes changed within communities by so-called prophetic actions that are based on a hermeneutic not always consonant with the datum of scripture and tradition." He also objected to communities that deal with differences by allowing for a "local option." "Somewhere in this process,"

Benedict said, “the need for diachronic koinonia—community with the church in every age—is lost.”

Benedict did not name names, but one can assume that he had in mind Protestant innovations regarding homosexuality, sacramental practice or theological formulas. Protestants would want to point out that some innovations are in keeping with the deepest meanings of scripture and tradition, and that allowing local options can serve the aims of the gospel. Benedict did Protestants the honor of engaging fundamental issues. Perhaps the best response by ecumenically minded Protestants would be to reflect more rigorously on their counterarguments.