



## The Word From Rome

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By JOHN L. ALLEN JR.

July 27 marked Pope Benedict XVI's 100th day in office. Over that time, we have had indications of several of the pope's core concerns -- the struggle against the "dictatorship of relativism," the push for Christian unity, a shakeup in ecclesiastical bureaucracy, and global development, especially in Africa.

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No global leader, however, has the luxury of setting his or her agenda in a vacuum. The fabric of a papacy is woven not only from what a pope sets out to accomplish, but the way in which unforeseen events push him in particular directions.

One event that seems likely to occur with appalling regularity is terrorism, specifically terrorism inspired by Islamic radicalism. This means that the relationship with Islam is destined to be a defining element of papal leadership under Benedict XVI.

The delicacy of that relationship has already been in evidence.

After the London bombings on July 7, a draft telegram of condolence prepared for the pope by the Secretariat of State called the attacks "anti-Christian," which would have been taken as a reference to a "clash of civilizations" between Islam and the West. That language was removed before the telegram was issued, but not before Italian media had reported the earlier version.

Last Sunday, July 24, Benedict XVI was pressed on Islam by journalists after his Sunday Angelus address in Val d'Aosta.

Can Islam be considered a religion of peace?

"I wouldn't label it with generalized words," the pope responded. "Certainly it has elements that favor peace, as it has other elements. We always have to seek to find the best elements that help."

Can these terrorist attacks be considered 'anti-Christian'?

"No," the pope replied. "Generally the intention seems to be much more general, not precisely directed at Christianity."

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In this light, it is worth reviewing what is known about Pope Benedict XVI's attitudes towards Islam. One note of caution, however, is in order: There is not always a straight line between one's personal views, and the policies that person pursues once in power. The extent to which Joseph Ratzinger's history shapes the concrete choices awaiting Benedict XVI remains to be seen.

At a personal level, Ratzinger has had fruitful contacts with Muslims over the years. When the Iranian Ayatollah Kashani, for example, a member of the powerful Council of Guardians in Tehran, decided to write a book comparing Islamic and Christian eschatological themes, Ratzinger met with him in the Vatican and swapped theological ideas.

In 1999, Ratzinger joined Prince Hassan of Jordan, Orthodox Metropolitan Damaskinos, Prince Sadruddin Aga Khan (a former United Nations official and an Ismaili Muslim who died in 2003), and former French chief rabbi Rene Samuel Sirat, in launching the Foundation for Interreligious and Intercultural Research and Dialogue in Geneva. The foundation is dedicated to promoting relations among Jews, Christians and Muslims. Ratzinger also took part in a Christian-Muslim dialogue sponsored by the Orthodox Patriarchate of Constantinople in the 1980s.

In his address to the representatives of other religions the day after his April 24 installation Mass, Pope Benedict made a point of mentioning Muslims.

"I am particularly grateful for the presence in our midst of members of the Muslim community, and I express my appreciation for the growth of dialogue between Muslims and Christians, both at the local and international level. I assure you that the church wants to continue building bridges of friendship with the followers of all religions, in order to seek the true good of every person and of society as a whole," he said.

Ratzinger's most extended comments on Islam came in 1997's *The Salt of the Earth*, a book-length interview with German journalist Peter Seewald. It's worth quoting those comments in full:

*"I think that first we must recognize that Islam is not a uniform thing. In fact, there is no single authority for all Muslims, and for this reason dialogue with Islam is always dialogue with certain groups. No one can speak for Islam as a whole; it has, as it were, no commonly regarded orthodoxy. And, to prescind from the schism between Sunnis and Shiites, it also exists in many varieties. There is a noble Islam, embodied, for example, by the King of Morocco, and there is also the extremist, terrorist Islam, which, again, one must not identify with Islam as a whole, which would do it an injustice.*

*"An important point, however, is ... that the interplay of society, politics, and religion has a completely difference structure in Islam as a whole. Today's discussion in the West about the possibility of Islamic theological faculties, or about the idea of Islam as a legal entity, presupposes that all religions have basically the same structure, that they all fit into a*

*democratic system with its regulations and the possibilities provided by these regulations. In itself, however, this necessarily contradicts the essence of Islam, which simply does not have the separation of the political and religious sphere which Christianity has had from the beginning. The Koran is a total religious law, which regulates the whole of political and social life and insists that the whole order of life be Islamic. Sharia shapes society from beginning to end. In this sense, it can exploit such partial freedoms as our constitution gives, but it can't be its final goal to say: Yes, now we too are a body with rights, now we are present just like the Catholics and the Protestants. In such a situation, it would not achieve a status consistent with its inner nature; it would be in alienation from itself.*

*"Islam has a total organization of life that is completely different from ours; it embraces simply everything. There is a very marked subordination of woman to man; there is a very tightly knit criminal law, indeed, a law regulating all areas of life, that is opposed to our modern ideas about society. One has to have a clear understanding that it is not simply a denomination that can be included in the free realm of a pluralistic society. When one represents the situation in those terms, as often happens today, Islam is defined according to the Christian model and is not seen as it really is in itself. In this sense, the question of dialogue with Islam is naturally much more complicated than, for example, an internal dialogue among Christians.*

*"The consolidation of Islam worldwide is a multifaceted phenomenon. On the one hand, financial factors play a role here. The financial power that the Arab countries have attained and that allows them to build large Mosques everywhere, to guarantee a presence of Muslim cultural institutes and more things of that sort. But that is certainly only one factor. The other is an enhanced identity, a new self-consciousness.*

*"In the cultural situation of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, until the 1960s, the superiority of the Christian countries was industrially, culturally, politically, and militarily so great that Islam was really forced into the second rank. Christianity -- at any rate, civilizations with a Christian foundation -- could present themselves as the victorious power in world history. But then the great moral crisis of the Western world, which appears to be the Christian world, broke out. In the face of the deep moral contradictions of the West and of its internal helplessness -- which was suddenly opposed by a new economic power of the Arab countries -- the Islamic soul reawakened. We are somebody too; we know who we are; our religion is holding its ground; you don't have one any longer.*

*"This is actually the feeling today of the Muslim world: The Western countries are no longer capable of preaching a message of morality, but have only know-how to offer the world. The Christian religion has abdicated; it really no longer exists as a religion; the Christians no longer have a morality or a faith; all that's left are a few remains of some modern ideas of enlightenment; we have the religion that stands the test.*

*"So the Muslims now have the consciousness that in reality Islam has*

*remained in the end as the more vigorous religion and that they have something to say to the world, indeed, are the essential religious force of the future. Before, the shariah and all those things had already left the scene, in a sense; now there is a new pride. Thus a new zest, a new intensity about wanting to live Islam has awakened. This is its great power: We have a moral message that has existed without interruption since the prophets, and we will tell the world how to live it, whereas the Christians certainly can't. We must naturally come to terms with this inner power of Islam, which fascinates even academic circles."*

The pope obviously admires the religious and moral seriousness of Islam. In a debate with Italian intellectual Ernesto Galli della Loggia on October 25, 2004, Ratzinger rejected the argument that public conversation about the Christian roots of Europe offends Muslim immigrants.

"But this isn't what offends them," Ratzinger said. "It's disrespect for God and religion that offends them. This disrespect is a kind of arrogance in diminished reason. This is what provokes fundamentalisms."

Yet in his writings on eschatology, Ratzinger has accused some Muslim strains of fomenting a kind of liberation theology vis-a-vis Israel -- i.e, the belief that liberation from Israel will be accomplished through divinely approved armed resistance.

Finally, Ratzinger has irked some Muslims by his opposition to Turkey's candidacy to join the European union.

In an August 2004 interview with the French publication *Le Figaro*, Ratzinger said that Turkey has always been "in permanent contrast to Europe," and that it should look instead to play a leadership role in a network of Islamic states.

"In the course of history, Turkey has always represented a different continent," Ratzinger said, citing the Ottoman Empire. "Making the two continents identical would be a mistake. It would mean a loss of richness, the disappearance of the cultural to the benefit of economics."

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What does all this tell us?

First, Pope Benedict XVI is aware of the diversity within Islam.

Second, Benedict is hardly blind to the impulses towards theocracy and "Arabization" within Islam, which he sees not as distortions, but part of what he calls its "inner nature."

Third, Benedict also sees in Islam an admirable, even enviable, sense of itself, coupled with clarity both in the metaphysical and moral realms. In his war against the "dictatorship of relativism," Muslims can be powerful allies.

Fourth, the flash-point in the Catholic/Muslim relationship under Benedict is likely to be Europe, and specifically, the extent to which Europe as a matter of both cultural conviction and civil law should express and defend its Christian identity.

In this context, Benedict's meeting with European Muslims in Cologne on August 20 is likely to be important, as it gives the pope an opportunity to outline the contours of how he sees things.

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This week saw an unexpected crisis in Vatican-Israeli relations following the pope's July 24 Angelus address, in which Benedict expressed sympathy for the victims of recent terrorist actions in Great Britain, Turkey, Iraq and Egypt, but not Israel, where five people died on July 14 after a bombing in Netanya.

Mark Regev, a spokesperson for the Israel foreign ministry, said that the omission of Israel "cries out to heaven," and that it "could be interpreted as a license for acts of terrorism against Jews." Regev also said that the pope's "deafening silence ... risks reinforcing extremist elements who oppose peace, and weakening moderates."

The Israeli foreign ministry formally called in the papal nuncio, Archbishop Pietro Sambi, on Monday for an explanation.

At 5:21 that evening, Vatican spokesperson Joaquin Navarro-Valls issued a one-line statement to journalists. "The nuncio has already replied to the Israeli authorities," it read.

At 6:24 p.m., another alert appeared, this time signaling a longer statement.

The full text follows:

*"Regarding the reactions on the part of the Israelis to the fact that the Holy Father in his Angelus of July 24 did not, alongside other countries, also mention Israel, it should be noted that the words of Benedict XVI referred expressly to the attacks of 'these days.' It is surprising that the intention of the Holy Father would be distorted on a pretext in this way, since the numerous interventions of the church, of the magisterium of the Supreme Pontiffs and most recently of Pope Benedict XVI, in condemnation of every form of terrorism, wherever it comes from and whoever it's directed against, are well known. Obviously, the grave attack of Netanya from last week, to which the observations from the Israelis refer, reenters into the general condemnation without exception of terrorism."*

By emphasizing that Benedict had spoken of actions in "these days," Navarro-Valls was calling attention to the nature of the Angelus address. Since it's a weekly affair, it's customary for the pope to refer to events that have taken place in the last week. By July 24, the bombing in Netanya was 10 days in the past.

Obviously unsatisfied, an official of the Israeli Foreign Ministry gave an interview to the *Jerusalem Post* on July 26, asserting that John Paul II had also failed to denounce terrorism against Israel.

That triggered an acerbic response from Navarro-Valls, who issued a declaration at 4:16 p.m. on July 28, along with a note containing various citations from John Paul II in which he denounced terrorism against Israel. English translations of the declaration and note can be found in the Special Documents section of NCRonline.org or follow this link: