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By JOHN L. ALLEN JR.

**Editor's Note:** NCR is moving its e-mail lists to a new user-authenticated system. To continue to receive e-mail alerts for this column, you must re-subscribe before Oct. 12. Follow this link: [Sign-up Page](#). The new system will help you and us control spam.

**UPATED:** John Allen updated this story with a report posted to NCRonline.org Monday morning. Here's the link: [Pope apologizes: 'Medieval text does not express my personal thought'](#). A discussion table opened on NCRcafe.org on this topic. Take a look: [Papal apologies](#)

I was forced to miss this week's trip by Benedict XVI to Bavaria due to lectures I had agreed months ago to give in Irvine , California , and Cleveland. Among other things, this means I had to pass up the world's best sausage and beer, and as I told both groups to which I spoke, they will never need additional evidence of the full measure of my devotion to their cause.



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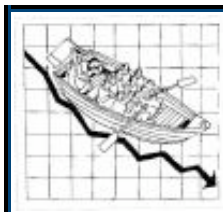
(It turns out that local Bavarian authorities banned the sale of beer during events on the papal itinerary, but the word from colleagues on the trip is that this did not prove an insurmountable obstacle).

Even at a distance, it's possible to offer some general observations about the Sept. 9-14 homecoming of Benedict XVI.

I have written before that Benedict XVI is not a PC pope. By that, I don't mean that he sets out to give offense; on the contrary, he's one of the most gracious figures ever to step on the world stage. Instead, he simply does not allow his thinking to be channeled by the taboos and fashions of ordinary public discourse.

For example, any PR consultant would have told the pope that if he wanted to make a point about the relationship between faith and reason, he shouldn't open up with a comparison between Islam and Christianity that would be widely understood as a criticism of Islam, suggesting that it's irrational and prone to violence. Yet that is precisely what Benedict did in his address to 1,500 students and faculty at the University of Regensburg on Wednesday, citing a 14th century dialogue between the Byzantine emperor Manuel II Paleologus and a learned Persian.

News headlines immediately focused upon the pope's use of the term jihad and its implied swipe at Muslim-influenced terrorism, shaping up as something of a replay of the Danish cartoon controversy.



### Cartoon of the Week

... in search of a caption

Promoting conversation through imagery and symbols.

Yet he brought up the dialogue between Paleologus and the Persian to make a different point. Under the influence of its Greek heritage, he said, Christianity

represents a decisive choice in favor of the rationality of God. While Muslims may stress God's majesty and absolute transcendence, Christians believe it would contradict God's nature to act irrationally. He argued that the Gospel of John spoke the last word on the biblical concept of God: In the beginning was the *logos*, usually translated as word, but it is also the Greek term for reason.

The lecture, titled "Faith, Reason and the University: Memories and Reflections," ran to almost 4,000 words (more than a half-hour of speaking time), and its main concern was with what Benedict sees as an artificial truncation of human reason in the West. Since the Reformation, he argued, Western thinkers have come to regard theology and metaphysics as unscientific.

That is problematic, Benedict said, on two counts.

First, it leaves reason mute before the great questions of life and death, questions about why we are here and how we should act.

"This is a dangerous state of affairs for humanity," the pope said, "as we see from the disturbing pathologies of religion and reason which necessarily erupt when reason is so reduced that questions of religion and ethics no longer concern it. Attempts to construct an ethic from the rules of evolution or from psychology and sociology, end up being simply inadequate."

Second, its logically self-defeating for science itself, which depends upon the assumption of order and reason in the universe, but cant explain why things should work that way in the first place.

"The question why this has to be so is a real question, and one which has to be remanded by the natural sciences to other modes and planes of thought to philosophy and theology," the pope said. "For philosophy and, albeit in a different way, for theology, listening to the great experiences and insights of the religious traditions of humanity, and those of the Christian faith in particular, is a source of knowledge, and to ignore it would be an unacceptable restriction of our listening and responding."

Ultimately, Benedict argued, a form of reason which rejects religious and philosophical thinking cannot promote dialogue with other cultures.

"In the Western world, it is widely held that only positivistic reason and the forms of philosophy based on it are universally valid," he said. "Yet

the world's profoundly religious cultures see this exclusion of the divine from the universality of reason as an attack on their most profound convictions. A reason which is deaf to the divine and which relegates religion into the realm of subcultures is incapable of entering into the dialogue of cultures."

Whatever the merits of Benedict's argument, it is a subtle and carefully modulated analysis of Western intellectual history head and shoulders above the standard fare most leaders offer on the stump. Of course, that's not what the world is talking about right now, raising the question of whether Benedict could do with a dash more sensitivity to how wires in today's hair-trigger world are tripped.

The Vatican on Thursday issued a statement insisting that Benedict had no intention of giving offense, and that part of his argument at Regensburg was precisely in favor of respect of the religious convictions of humanity.

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Aside from the fracas over Islam, Benedict has actually once again shown himself to be a figure singularly uninterested in grabbing headlines. In face of a rebellious Catholic community in Germany, Benedict might have used the occasion to issue a stern call to order, but he did nothing of the sort. Neither did he engage in much public breast-beating over general European declines in faith and practice. Nor did Benedict follow the model of John Paul II by going personal, using the details of his own biography to underscore points or openly letting his emotions flow.

Instead, in his public messages Benedict focused largely on the pastoral basics. Consider these words, addressed to German parents:



**Discuss this topic**

Two tables have opened on the NCRcafe discussing Benedict's apology and

his approach to Islam. This is your invitation to join these conversations: [Benedict's apology](#) and [Benedict's jihad remark](#)

*Please, go with your children to church and take part in the Sunday Eucharistic celebration! ... Sunday becomes more beautiful, the whole week becomes more beautiful, when you go to Sunday Mass together. And please, pray together at home too: at meals and before going to bed. Prayer does not only bring us nearer to God but also nearer to one another.*

As we have seen during his other public voyages, this is Benedict the pastor at work. For the most part, he avoids theological speculation or hard-hitting political commentary, striving instead to speak to the immediate spiritual needs of ordinary people.

I wrote in Poland that when Benedict travels he has an intended audience in mind, and it certainly isn't the press corps. The Italian daily *Corriere della Sera* tried to profile it statistically on Tuesday, using the results of a recent poll on religious practice in Italy . (In general terms, the findings have parallels pretty much everywhere in the West).

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The survey found that more than 90 percent of Italians describe themselves as Catholic, while just 25 percent go to Mass on a weekly basis. Twenty percent never go at all, and the remainder are clumped somewhere in the middle.

These in-betweeners still think of themselves as Catholic, still recognize the church as a moral and spiritual point of reference, but to varying degrees have drifted away from regular practice of the faith. They have a Catholic background, according to the poll, but are moving in the direction of progressive secularization.

That broad middle people not instinctively hostile to the church, but not wild about it either represents, according to *Corriere*, Benedict's potential market. His strategy seems to be to speak in positive tones about the Christian message, avoiding giving headline writers occasions to fashion banners along the lines of, "Pope condemns x". He's also offering a back to basics message, focusing on scripture, the church fathers, the devotional life and the sacraments, proposing that they offer the best way to satisfy post-modernity's need for meaning.

His gambit seems to be that by not feeding "the beast" -- to use the language of Washington about giving the media juicy sound-bites -- he can do an end-run around the normal filters of the secular press, allowing the natural categories of the Christian faith to fashion the discussion. The question, of course, is whether anyone outside the 25 percent of Catholics who are basically already with the pope, and who probably constitute the bulk of the crowds who have turned out in Bavaria to see him, will actually hear it.

On that front, only time will tell.

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**O**ne other point from the Regensburg lecture.

Benedict documented three stages in what he called the attempt at "dehellenization" of Christianity, meaning the effort to strip it of its Greco-Roman heritage and return it to a state of "pure faith," which could be re-expressed in different cultural forms in other parts of the world. The stages are the Reformation, the liberal theology of the 19th and 20th century, and the current push for "cultural pluralism."

The pope referred to the argument for "dehellenization" as "not only false," but "coarse and lacking in precision."

"True, there are elements in the evolution of the early Church which do not have to be integrated into all cultures," he said. "Nonetheless, the fundamental decisions made about the relationship between faith and the use of human reason are part of the faith itself; they are developments consonant with the nature of faith itself."

This is a point with potential importance for the issue of "inculturation," or calls for Christianity to be shaped by the local cultures in which it finds itself. The debate is usually most intense in the developing world, where some theologians suggest that Christianity's European modes of expressions should be set aside to allow a genuinely African, or Asian, or Latin American form of the faith to emerge.

In the past, Benedict has argued that the term "inculturation" is imprecise, because it suggests that a pure faith comes into contact with a historically conditioned culture. The better term, he has suggested, is "inter-culturation," because Christianity itself is a culture. Some aspects of its Greco-Roman and European inheritance, Benedict has said, cannot simply be cast aside.

The choice in favor of reason would, judging from the Regensburg address, be one example of what the pope has in mind.

What all this suggests is that Benedict will judge calls for liturgical adaptation, for example, or "African theology" with caution.

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**L**ast week I carried an item about Br. Mark Schenk, a lay friar recently elected by the Capuchins to serve on their General Council in Rome. I noted this was believed to be a first for the order.

In the early hours after the column went up, many religious wrote to indicate that their communities have had lay members serving in similar leadership roles for some time. (Ironically, in some cases the people they wrote to tell me about are actually personal friends).



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