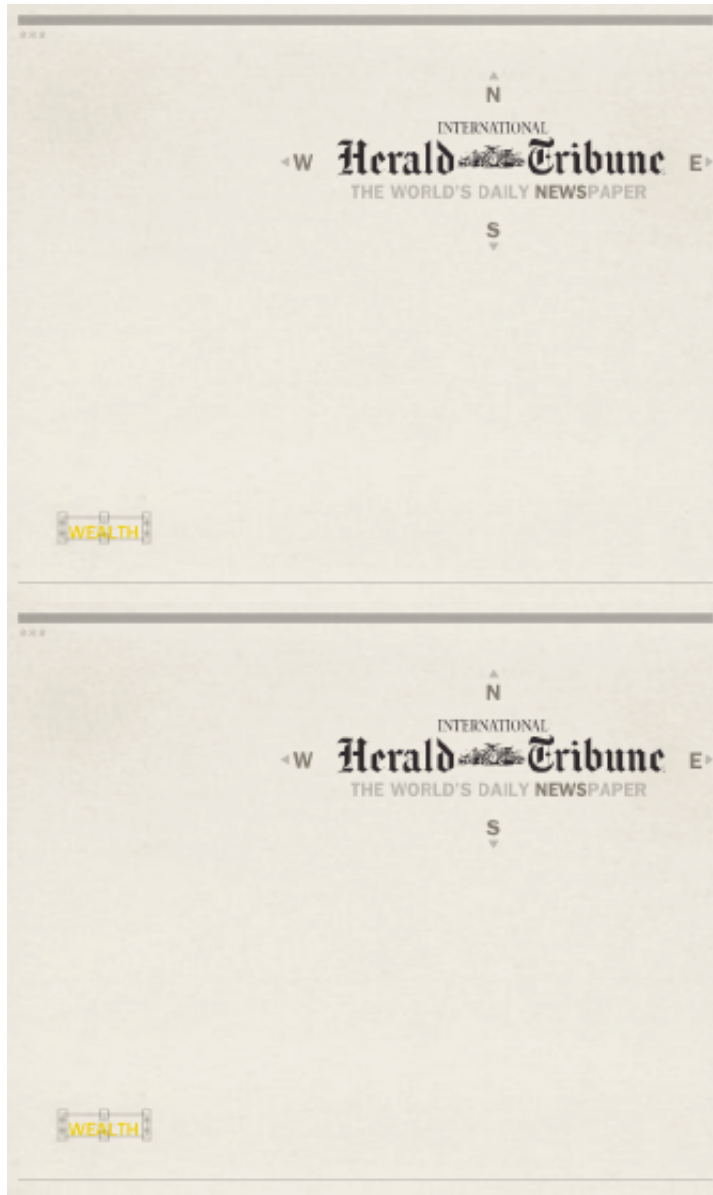


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Pope Benedict XVI prays at Blue Mosque in Turkey

By Ian Fisher

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ISTANBUL

Pope Benedict XVI, who spurred anger among Muslims just two months ago, stood Thursday in silent prayer, facing Mecca, alongside a Muslim prelate in one of the world's most important mosques.

The image - of two men in white, the 79-year-old pope and Mustafa Cagrici, the head of religious affairs for Istanbul, under the ornate domes of the Blue Mosque - sealed a trip in which Benedict repeatedly underscored his desire to reconcile Christians and Muslims.

How much he achieved that goal here is unclear, after the deep anger over a speech criticized as equating Islam with violence.

But Cagrici proclaimed the start as good, with Benedict becoming only the second pope in 2,000 years known to have visited a mosque.

"Spring will not arrive by a single swallow," he told the pope. "But more swallows will arrive and we're going to enjoy spring in the world all together."

The two men exchanged nearly identical gifts of paintings of doves as signs of peace - a coincidence that seemed to amuse the pope. In turn, he told Cagrici, "With the help of God, we must find the way of peace together, for the good of humanity."

But even with the symbolism of the mosque visit and more diplomatic style, Benedict showed on Thursday, the day before he returns home, that many of his basic concerns about the relationship between Christianity and Islam, as well as between West and East, had not vanished. Twice on Thursday he referred to the "Christian roots of Europe" - a long theme of Benedict's, which has provoked some anger as minimizing others who now live there, especially the growing Muslim population.

He went further in a joint declaration with Bartholomew, the Orthodox patriarch of Constantinople, referring also to the Christian roots of Turkey - a historical fact, with the Byzantine church based here for more than a millennium, but which still seemed to run the risk of offending his Muslim hosts.

On Thursday, he again seemed to endorse Turkey's entry into the European Union - repeating the good-will gesture he made on Tuesday, his first day here - but tied that step

to specific progress in respecting the rights of minorities here. The small population of Orthodox Christians here complains of official harassment and bureaucratic obstacles that have prevented it from operating freely.

Of the EU, the pope wrote in his joint declaration with Bartholomew, "Those engaged in this great project should not fail to take into consideration all aspects affecting the inalienable rights of the human person, especially religious freedom, a witness and guarantor of respect for all other freedoms.

"In every step toward unification" they wrote, "minorities must be protected, with their cultural traditions and the distinguishing features of their religion."

Finally, he repeated a theme from his speech in September in Regensburg, Germany - about his worry about violence in the cause of religion - though without mentioning any religion by name.

"Above all, we wish to affirm that killing innocent people in God's name is an offense against him and against human dignity," he and Bartholomew wrote in their statement.

In all, the pope has seemed to toe a careful line of not backing down in substance - with the exception of cautiously blessing the progress of Turkey into the European Union - while presenting a more open, warmer face to an Islamic world that now deeply distrusts him. The pope's spokesman, the Reverend Federico Lombardi, said that the speech, however painful, had helped open a new vein of dialogue between Christians and Muslims.

"Regensburg bore a positive fruit, in a certain sense," he told reporters after the pope's visit to the mosque.

His relations with Muslims were only one facet of the trip - and for the Vatican, not the most important one in the long run. On Thursday, Benedict continued what he considered his main task here, to help heal the rift with the world's 220 million Orthodox Christians.

For 40 years, the two churches have been engaged in halting talks toward reuniting, and on Thursday the pope attended an Orthodox Mass, trading speeches with Bartholomew that expressed hope for future negotiations toward unity.

Bartholomew, the spiritual head of the world's Orthodox, though not its leader with the same power the pope holds over the world's billion Roman Catholics, called Benedict's presence in Turkey part of the "unwavering journey toward the restoration of full communion among our churches, which constitutes His divine will and command."

"May it be so," he said.

Benedict's twin goals of overcoming enmities, old and new, both between Christians and Muslims and among Christians themselves, could not find a more apt or complicated stage than Istanbul - a fact that was particularly vivid on the final day before he travels back to Rome.

Here the dramas of two millennia of conflict, distant but very real, play out perhaps as in no other place, endowing the pope's visit with deep symbolic value - and presenting endless dangers for offense.

Before the pope visited the Blue Mosque, he toured the Hagia Sophia, the present structure built in the sixth century, which had been the seat of the Byzantine church, which split from Roman Catholicism in 1054. After the Ottoman Turks defeated the Byzantines in 1453, the church was turned into a mosque. Kemal Ataturk, founder of the modern, secular Turkish

state, turned it into a museum in 1935 - making it neither Christian nor Muslim.

Still, many Turks were watching Benedict carefully on his tour there on Thursday, closed to the public and quiet except for a handful of stray cats that scampered across the ancient marble, to see if he would pray. Pope Paul VI got down on his knees, though he had permission, when he visited it in 1967, outraging Turks who felt he was subtly claiming the building back for Christianity.

But Benedict played very much the tourist, merely nodding and asking questions as he stopped at an alcove that displayed the church's split identity: A ninth-century fresco of the Virgin Mary and the Christ Child looked down from a dome to walls covered with Arabic calligraphy citing the names of Allah and the Prophet Muhammad.

After his tour he walked across the plaza - under the tightest security, with helicopters overhead, and riot policemen with shields and tear gas - to the Blue Mosque, built in the early 17th century by Sultan Ahmed: the Sultan's goal was also part of the competition between religions, to prove that Muslims could outdo Christians, even in the majesty of their buildings.

Before Benedict's visit, John Paul II became the first pope known to visit a mosque. It is usually reported that he did so first in Damascus in 2001, though a Jesuit priest active in inter-religious dialogue said recently that the first visit was actually in Senegal in 1992.

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