

Part One:

Benedict's visit to a land called to be holy

David Neuhaus SJ

One month ago, Pope Benedict made a much-heralded trip to the Holy Land. But what was his message? In two instalments, Israeli Jesuit and biblical scholar, David Neuhaus examines his words and actions to uncover a bold, prophetic message which has received all too little coverage in the media. Today, he looks at the pilgrim and the pastor on a mission to strengthen the people of the region, before analysing the tenor of his outreach to Jews and Muslims. In a second instalment, we will look at the Pope's courageous calls for reconciliation, and at his new and challenging vision for the Holy Land and the world.

As Christians in the Holy Land reflect on the visit of Pope Benedict XVI, which took place from May 8 to 15, 2009 and during which he visited Jordan, Israel and the Palestinian Autonomy, a first act is one of thanksgiving. First and foremost, thanksgiving to God for the wonderful gift of being able to welcome the Holy Father to the land that is the land of Jesus of Nazareth, the land of those who preceded him – priests, kings, sages and prophets – and those who followed him: disciples, apostles, martyrs and holy men and women. This same land is also the land of the Christians who live here and with pride we could say: 'Ahlan wa-sahlan' and 'Baruch HaBa' ('welcome' in Arabic and in Hebrew).

The Holy Father came as a *pilgrim* to pray for peace and unity in the places made holy by God through the history of salvation. He came as *pastor* to the Christian communities that form the Church of the Holy Land. He came as a *man of dialogue* to meet all Christians (not just Catholics), Jews and Muslims. He came as *peacemaker* to plead for justice and peace, pardon and reconciliation. In these four roles, he was able to show Christ's face to those who listened to his words and followed his steps. What he said and did will, as we will see, undoubtedly help the Church further



formulate her vision for this troubled land, arena of the formative encounters between God and the human person but submerged in conflict and bloodshed. The Pope's journey will help the Church understand more deeply her vocation and her mission in this part of the world as all parties to the conflict demand her support.

Benedict the Pilgrim

The Holy Father came as a pilgrim to the places sanctified by God as meeting places with the human person in the central events of our history of salvation. On his return from his pilgrimage, the Holy Father commented:

The Holy Land has been called a 'fifth Gospel,' because here we see, indeed touch, the reality of the history that God realised together with men – beginning with the places of Abraham's life to the places of Jesus' life, from the incarnation to the empty tomb, sign of his resurrection. Yes, God came to this land, he acted with us in this world. But here we can say still more: the Holy Land, because of its very history, can be considered a microcosm that recapitulates in itself God's arduous journey with humanity.¹

The Pope's visit encourages all Christians to come to this land because 'the Gospel story, contemplated in

its historical and geographical setting, becomes vivid and colourful, and a clearer grasp of the significance of the Lord's words and deeds is obtained'.² Christians see this land as different from all others because it is in this particular place that revelation met history, providing Christians with the very vocabulary and images of their faith. It is here, then, that Christians can come to refuel themselves, contemplating the events of the history of salvation, events that define who Christians are as the people of God. They come to re-experience the events of the Biblical narrative in order to actualise the meeting between God and the human person in their lives, wherever they may live. Christian pilgrims do not come to lay claim to the land but to carry from this land, called to be holy, the holiness they rediscover here, at the cradle of their faith. As with the Mass, the main focus is not 'coming to' but rather 'going from'.

The Pope was able to visit the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, the Cenacle on Mount Zion, the Nativity Grotto in Bethlehem, the Annunciation Grotto in Nazareth, the Baptism site at the Jordan. At each place, the Pope could do what every pilgrim comes to do: to pray. Prayer must be one of the most important lessons of this visit. We, as Christians, are called before all else to be people of prayer, who open our hearts to a God seeking to work through His children in order to give them the gifts they most earnestly desire: peace and unity.

Prayer is hope in action. And in fact true reason is contained in prayer: we come into loving contact with the one God, the universal Creator, and in so doing we come to realise the futility of human divisions and prejudices and we sense the wondrous possibilities that open up before us when our hearts are converted to God's truth, to his design for each of us and our world.³

In lands where despair too often reigns supreme, prayer guides us to the surprising creativity of a God who can open even the most hermetically sealed routes. Benedict the pilgrim proclaimed this reality at every turn on his journey among us.

Benedict the Pastor

The most intense and joyful moments in the Holy Father's visit were the times of prayer that he spent surrounded by the Christian communities of the Holy Land, and most particularly the four public Masses

celebrated with the local faithful in Amman, Jerusalem, Bethlehem and Nazareth, where he expressed his fatherly solicitude for these disciples of Jesus living in the midst of conflict and travail. The Holy Father underlined the unique vocation of Christians in the region, encouraging them to continue bearing witness to the love of Christ in the land of Christ.

Fidelity to your Christian roots, fidelity to the Church's mission in the Holy Land, demands of each of you a particular kind of courage: the courage of conviction, born of personal faith, not mere social convention or family tradition; the courage to engage in dialogue and to work side by side with other Christians in the service of the Gospel and solidarity with the poor, the displaced, and the victims of profound human tragedies; the courage to build new bridges to enable a fruitful encounter of people of different religions and cultures, and thus to enrich the fabric of society. It also means bearing witness to the love which inspires us to 'lay down' our lives in the service of others, and thus to counter ways of thinking which justify 'taking' innocent lives.⁴

It was in Jerusalem, at the Mass held at the foot of the Mount of Olives, a few paces from the Garden of Gethsemane, that the Holy Father made direct reference to the many difficulties Christians face. In this context, he called on Christians to be pillars of faith and harmony: 'Standing before you today, I wish to acknowledge the difficulties, the frustration, and the pain and suffering which so many of you have endured as a result of the conflicts which have afflicted these lands, and the bitter experiences of displacement which so many of your families have known and – God forbid – may yet know'. Here he fulfilled the words he had spoken in planning the visit: that he sought to come to support, console and encourage the Christians of the Holy Land. 'I hope my presence here is a sign that you are not forgotten, that your persevering presence and witness are indeed precious in God's eyes and integral to the future of these lands.'⁵

In Bethlehem, in the heart of the Palestinian Autonomy, the Holy Father dwelt upon the Christian call to be witnesses to vitality rather than to death, to be evangelists of life:

Above all, be witnesses to the power of life, the new life brought by the Risen Christ, the life that can illumine

and transform even the darkest and most hopeless of human situations. Your homeland needs not only new economic and community structures, but most importantly, we might say, a new 'spiritual' infrastructure, capable of galvanizing the energies of all men and women of good will in the service of education, development and the promotion of the common good. You have the human resources to build the culture of peace and mutual respect which will guarantee a better future for your children. This noble enterprise awaits you. Do not be afraid!⁶

It was in the vespers service in the Basilica of the Annunciation in Nazareth that the Holy Father offered his most powerful image for the Christians of the Holy Land:

Perhaps at times you feel that your voice counts for little. Many of your fellow Christians have emigrated, in the hope of finding greater security and better prospects elsewhere. Your situation calls to mind that of the young Virgin Mary, who led a hidden life in Nazareth, with little by way of worldly wealth or influence. Yet to quote Mary's words in her great hymn of praise, the Magnificat, God has looked upon his servant in her lowliness, he has filled the hungry with good things. Draw strength from Mary's canticle, which very soon we will be singing in union with the whole Church throughout the world! Have the confidence to be faithful to Christ and to remain here in the land that he sanctified with his own presence! Like Mary, you have a part to play in God's plan for salvation, by bringing Christ forth into the world, by bearing witness to him and spreading his message of peace and unity.⁷

At these moments of intense and joyful prayer, there was an insistence on unity within the Catholic Church of the Holy Land, where Roman Catholics (known in these lands as Latins) are only one tradition among many. The liturgies the Pope celebrated combined strands from the Byzantine (Greek Catholic), Maronite, Syrian and Armenian traditions. As the Holy Father said: 'The ancient living treasure of the traditions of the Eastern Churches enriches the universal Church.'⁸

An important element of the Holy Father's visit among the local Christian communities, not to be overlooked, was the abundance of cornerstones that he blessed at every turn. He blessed the building of two new churches at the Baptism site in Jordan, one Roman Catholic and one Greek Catholic; he blessed the cornerstones of two new Christian-sponsored

universities, one in Madaba in Jordan (of the Latin Patriarchate) and one in Galilee, Israel (founded by the Greek Catholic Archbishop); he blessed numerous other cornerstones of new Christian institutions and constantly praised the existing Christian institutions that give Christian life in the Holy Land vitality, prominence and consistency.

Benedict the pastor sought to console, encourage and strengthen. The moments he spent with the Christians, especially in liturgical celebration, were moments of pride for them. Gathering together in their thousands, singing and praying as one body, proclaiming a message of peace and unity, the Christians of the Holy Land, and especially the young among them, could sense the meaning of their presence in these lands – apostles of love, pillars of faith, evangelists of life, preachers of the Kingdom. Dare we hope that these moments might be an encouragement to the young people, not only to stay but to rediscover their vocation and deepen its roots?

Benedict the Man of Dialogue

The Holy Father came to promote ecumenical and inter-religious dialogue during his visit. Coming into a region where Christians make up a tiny part of the population, he sought to assure Muslims and Jews that the Church was a partner in the attempt to build a better world. In Jordan and in the Palestinian Territories, the Pope was encountering societies that are predominantly Muslim. The controversies of the past were, if not forgotten, put to one side and the meetings with Muslims were marked by great cordiality. The Pope visited mosques in both Amman and Jerusalem and re-expressed the conviction that Muslims and Christians are called to work together to build societies based upon the values they share.

Certainly there exists a common message, and there will be an occasion to present it and, despite the difference of origins, we have common roots (...) Islam was also born in an environment where Judaism and various branches of Christianity, Judeo-Christianity, Antiochian-Byzantine-Christianity were present, and all these circumstances are reflected in the tradition of the Quran. In this way we have much in common from our origins, in the faith in the one God. For that, it is important on one hand to maintain dialogue with the two parts – with the Jews and with Islam – and as well a trilateral dialogue.⁹

In a world in which Islam is often portrayed as being totally other, the Pope has insisted that Islam has much in common with Judaism and Christianity. This affirmation, axiomatic for Vatican II's *Nostrae Aetate*, and affirmed by Pope Benedict, still has not penetrated all sectors of the Church. In Amman the Pope affirmed:

Muslims and Christians, precisely because of the burden of our common history so often marked by misunderstanding, must today strive to be known and recognised as worshippers of God faithful to prayer, eager to uphold and live by the Almighty's decrees, merciful and compassionate, consistent in bearing witness to all that is true and good, and ever mindful of the common origin and dignity of all human persons, who remain at the apex of God's creative design for the world and for history.¹⁰

Furthermore, he pointed out: 'Muslims worship God, the Creator of Heaven and Earth, who has spoken to humanity. And as believers in the one God we know that human reason is itself God's gift and that it soars to its highest plane when suffused with the light of God's truth.'¹¹

During the visit to Israel, Pope Benedict was careful to address some of the issues that had caused controversy with Jews in the past but he was also calmly insistent on the particular context of the Church he was visiting, the Church of Israel, where Christians have the unique position of living as a tiny minority within a large and powerful Jewish majority. It was evident that he had not forgotten that the majority of Christians in Israel are Palestinian Arab citizens of Israel, members of a people who are still struggling for their rights. The Holy Land is not Europe and, never forgetting the pastoral dimension of his visit to the Christians in the Holy Land, the Pope disappointed those who sought more forceful affirmations of the major themes of Jewish-Christian dialogue in Europe.

Addressing the subject of Catholic relations with the Jews, the Pope explained that overcoming centuries of difference, distrust and even hostility will take much wisdom and patience. As we learn to respect and honour what we have in common, the Church and the Jews must also discover how to respect and honour where we differ. 'We should do everything to

learn the language of the other, and it seems to me that we have made great progress.'¹² Inter-religious dialogue often seems smoother when we focus on our commonalities but the challenge is to promote dialogue when our differences are most evident. This is a formidable challenge that still lies before us.

While still in Jordan, as he looked into 'the Promised Land' from Mount Nebo, the Pope reminded his listeners of 'the inseparable bond between the Church and the Jewish people'¹³ – a link that passes through a shared spiritual and religious heritage: that of the Biblical tradition. The special place that the Jewish people have for the Church is tied to the Scriptures that Jews and Christians share and the spiritual-religious heritage that devolves from them. Face to face with the Jewish people, the Church is reminded of her own roots. However, this was also an important message for Muslims (and all Arabs): the dialogue with the Jews cannot be compromised by the difficult political situation between Israel and the Arab world in the past decades.

Following in the footsteps of Pope John Paul II, Benedict made two highly symbolic pilgrimages: one to the Western Wall, where he placed a written prayer on a note into the Wall; and the other to Yad VaShem, the memorial to the victims of the Shoah. It was at these two places that the Pope could be present to Jews in their spiritual-religious and in their historical-national dimension. Whereas at the Wall, the Pope simply read Psalm 122 in Latin, at Yad VaShem he tried to put words on the silence that is imposed by the horrific weight of history: 'a silence to remember, a silence to pray, a silence to hope.'¹⁴ In his words, the Pope again emphasised the importance of memory and vigilance: 'May the names of these victims never perish! May their suffering never be denied, belittled or forgotten! And may all people of goodwill remain vigilant in rooting out from the heart of man anything that could lead to tragedies such as this!'¹⁵

Immediately upon arrival in Israel, the Pope had acknowledged addressed the significance of the Shoah. He insisted that the Church is committed to remembering the fighting and victims, side by side with the Jewish people, of all manifestations of anti-Semitism:

I will have the opportunity to honour the memory of the six million Jewish victims of the Shoah, and to pray that humanity will never again witness a crime of such magnitude. Sadly, anti-Semitism continues to rear its ugly head in many parts of the world. This is totally unacceptable. Every effort must be made to combat anti-Semitism wherever it is found, and to promote respect and esteem for the members of every people, tribe, language and nation across the globe.¹⁶

Some expected the tone of a *mea culpa* in the Pope's words on the Shoah, both as a German and as head of the Catholic Church. Instead, what the Pope gave us was a resounding condemnation of anti-Semitism, the determination to fight it and the continuing commitment not to forget the victims. Benedict came as head of a universal Church and not simply as a European or a German. Specifically, he came into a context where his faithful are a small and embattled group struggling to find their place in a society that is predominantly Jewish. In this reality, he was determined to underline the universal message of the Shoah – may it never happen again to anyone; may we learn from it to build a better world together.

Perhaps with some of the recent controversies between Jews and Catholics in mind, at his meeting with the Chief Rabbis of Israel at the Chief Rabbinate, the Pope issued a plea for trust in the ongoing dialogue between Jews and Catholics.

Trust is undeniably an essential element of effective dialogue. Today I have the opportunity to repeat that the Catholic Church is irrevocably committed to the path chosen at the Second Vatican Council for a genuine and lasting reconciliation between Christians and Jews. As the Declaration *Nostra Aetate* makes clear, the Church continues to value the spiritual patrimony common to Christians and Jews and desires an ever deeper mutual understanding and respect through biblical and theological studies as well as fraternal dialogues.¹⁷

The Pope came back to the reflection on the spiritual heritage that the Church shares with Judaism in his final words at Tel Aviv Airport. Recalling that he had planted an olive tree with the Israeli President, Shimon Peres, at the latter's residence, he transferred the meaning of the olive tree from the political (a symbol of peace) to the spiritual

The olive tree, as you know, is an image used by Saint Paul to describe the very close relations between Christians and Jews. Paul describes in his Letter to the Romans how the Church of the Gentiles is like a wild olive shoot, grafted onto the cultivated olive tree which is the People of the Covenant (cf. 11:17-24). We are nourished from the same spiritual roots. We meet as brothers, brothers who at times in our history have had a tense relationship, but now are firmly committed to building bridges of lasting friendship.¹⁸

Some interfaith activists and in particular some Jewish commentators expressed disappointment at the Pope's declarations. This disappointment seemed often tinged with rancour concerning the Pope being a German or being a theologian of a conservative bent. In extreme cases, it seemed that opinions had been formed before the Pope even arrived. Some of the disappointment was a result of the constant comparisons with Pope John Paul II and his highly personal and charismatic approach. Alongside the images of Pope John Paul II, Pope Benedict seemed distant and unmoved. However, some of the disappointment was also due to Pope Benedict's insistence on the separation between the relationship with Jews (spiritual, religious) and the attitude to the State of Israel (political), repeating a coherent message about the patrimony that Jews and Christians share without ignoring the obligations of justice and peace. He reminded one and all that religion must be a factor that contributes to justice, peace, pardon, reconciliation and the respect for human rights within the concrete situation of the Holy Land, particularly with regard to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This message is not always a popular one, especially when these values are not at the very epicentre of inter-religious dialogue.

The great importance of the inter-religious dimension of the visit should not obscure the ecumenical dimension, particularly the ongoing dialogue with the Churches of the East. This visit was the occasion to meet the heads of all the non-Catholic Churches of the Holy Land; however, prominence was given particularly to the two venerable traditions within the Church of Jerusalem: the Greek Orthodox and the Armenian. The Pope's exhortation was for the leaders to work together in order to strengthen the faith of the Christians within the difficult situation of the

Holy Land: ‘The fundamental priority of every Christian leader is the nurturing of the faith of the individuals and families entrusted to his pastoral care. This common pastoral concern will ensure that your regular meetings are marked by the wisdom and fraternal charity necessary to support one another and to engage with both the joys and the particular difficulties which mark the lives of your people.’¹⁹ Finally, it needs to be pointed out that wherever Pope Benedict went ordinary non-Catholic Christians and their bishops and leaders came out to welcome him and pray with him, his very presence inspiring us to ever-greater unity.

*Fr David Neuhaus SJ is Patriarchal Vicar for Hebrew Speaking Catholics at the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem, www.catholic.co.il*²⁰

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- ¹ *Regina caeli* prayer in Rome, May 17, 2009
 - ² At the Cenacle, May 11, 2009
 - ³ At Regina Pacis Center, Amman, May 8, 2009
 - ⁴ At Mass in Amman, May 10, 2009
 - ⁵ At Mass in Jerusalem, May 12, 2009
 - ⁶ At Mass in Bethlehem, May 13, 2009
 - ⁷ At vespers in Nazareth, May 14, 2009
 - ⁸ At vespers in the Greek Catholic Cathedral of Amman on May 9, 2009
 - ⁹ On the aeroplane, May 8, 2009
 - ¹⁰ At the Hussein Mosque, May 9, 2009
 - ¹¹ At the Hussein Mosque, May 9, 2009
 - ¹² On the aeroplane, May 8, 2009
 - ¹³ At Mount Nebo, May 9, 2009
 - ¹⁴ At Yad VaShem, May 11, 2009
 - ¹⁵ At Yad VaShem, May 11, 2009
 - ¹⁶ At Ben Gurion Airport, May 11, 2009
 - ¹⁷ At the Chief Rabbinate, May 12, 2009
 - ¹⁸ At the Airport, May 15, 2009
 - ¹⁹ At the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate, May 15, 2009