

The pope's US visit: Media, White House, Congress embrace spokesman for religious obscurantism

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It is a measure of the profound decay of American democracy that when the president of the United States welcomed the Roman Catholic pontiff to Washington last week, a major concern was that the representative of a 2,000-year-old religious institution, steeped in reaction and hostility to science and human progress, might seem to criticize the US government from the left.

As it turned out, however, the Bush administration had nothing to fear from Benedict XVI. In a series of events in Washington and New York City, including an official welcome at the White House, the pope made no reference to the crimes perpetrated by the US government: the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the indefinite detention and torture of prisoners at Guantanamo and secret CIA-run prisons, and the government's adamant support for the death penalty.

Instead, Benedict took center stage in a political charade as Bush hailed him as a "man of peace" and advocate of "the weakest and most vulnerable."

The US president embraced the pope as an ideological soul mate. "In a world where some no longer believe that we can distinguish between simple right and wrong, we need your message to reject this dictatorship of relativism," he said.

The instigator of the illegal invasion and occupation of Iraq, which has cost the lives of more than one million Iraqis, as well as thousands of Americans, continued: "In a world where some treat life as something to be debased and discarded, we need your message that all human life is sacred."

The pontiff's six-day visit has received saturation coverage in the American media, of a largely fawning character. The only "negatives" have been the references to the sex abuse scandal involving thousands of American priests, which the pope was compelled to address directly on several occasions, in large measure because of threats of demonstrations and disruptions by victims of the abuse if he did not.

Both the official sponsorship of the pope's visit and the endless media coverage serve a major political purpose of the American ruling elite—to reinforce the role of religion in American public life and further erode the traditional separation of church and state, a major bulwark of democratic rights.

Besides the reception at the White House, there was a celebratory resolution adopted by Congress—after a brief squabble that compelled deletion of praise for the pope's anti-abortion stance—and the virtual shutdown of Capitol Hill the day of the outdoor mass at the Washington Nationals baseball stadium, attended by well over 100 senators and congressmen.

One of the pope's major themes in addresses in both Washington and New York City was to uphold the authority of Roman Catholic doctrine against what he described as "the subtle influence of secularism," by which he meant all efforts to oppose religious obscurantism in such areas as abortion, procreation, marriage and family life.

In remarks to Catholic bishops at the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington, he warned, "In the United States, as elsewhere, there is much current and proposed legislation that gives cause for concern from the point of view of morality."

This was a reference to abortion, gay rights and stem cell research, among other issues where the Catholic Church has sought to impose its dogmas through political agitation bordering on subversion—most recently in Spain, where the Catholic bishops have fueled a movement, so far unsuccessful, to bring down the government of Socialist Party Prime Minister Zapatero.

The pope declared that "any tendency to treat religion as a private matter must be resisted." This statement has remarkable implications. It flatly rejects the principles of religious tolerance and state neutrality toward religious belief on which the United States was founded, and suggests that Roman Catholic doctrine should be enacted by legislative fiat wherever possible.

In a separate address to officials of Catholic colleges and universities, Benedict demanded greater conformity with Church doctrine, asserting that "any appeal to the principle of academic freedom in order to justify positions that contradict the faith and the teaching of the church would obstruct or even betray the university's identity and mission."

This was not only a demand that professors and theologians at Catholic colleges—traditionally independent of the authority of

US bishops—toe the Vatican line. It was also a veiled rebuke to those Catholic schools that have permitted rallies or other public events for political candidates, usually Democrats, who support abortion rights and gay marriage.

Before assuming the papacy in 2005, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger was known as the “pope’s rottweiler” for his role as the enforcer of doctrinal orthodoxy and submission to papal authority under his predecessor, John Paul II. He supervised a systematic purge from the Catholic hierarchy of any trace of liberalism or sympathy with popular social struggles.

On Saturday, Benedict addressed the United Nations General Assembly—in his capacity as ruler of Vatican City, a UN member state—and warned that modern technology and science, with such advances as cloning and stem cell research, risked violating “the order of creation.”

He questioned the notion that human rights should be based on international law and constitutional principles, saying that they are not man-made, but “are based on the natural law inscribed on human hearts.” The pontiff, of course, did not bother to square this professed devotion to human rights and the Catholic hierarchy’s long record of support for repressive, dictatorial regimes which safeguarded the wealth of the Church, for many centuries the world’s largest property owner.

In his remarks to the UN body, Benedict embraced the doctrine of “humanitarian intervention,” advanced by advocates of a more aggressive UN role in Darfur and utilized by American officials to justify, at least retrospectively, their invasion and conquest of Iraq.

“Every state has the primary duty to protect its own population from grave and sustained violations of human rights,” he declared. “If states are unable to guarantee such protection, the international community must intervene with the juridical means provided in the United Nations charter and in other international instruments.”

The pope rejected the argument that such international intervention was “an unwarranted imposition or a limitation of sovereignty,” adding, “On the contrary, it is indifference or failure to intervene that does the real damage.”

Coming only two days after Benedict’s public embrace of George W. Bush—and complete silence on US war crimes in Iraq—this suggestion that “failure to intervene” is the greater evil had definite political connotations.

The papal visit had one major institutional crisis to deal with—the long-running scandal over the sexual abuse of children by thousands of Roman Catholic priests. This dimension of the visit brought another display of media adulation and ideological reaction.

The press portrayed Benedict—who adamantly rebuffed sex abuse victims for years while serving John Paul II—as deeply moved by their suffering. In his initial remarks about the scandal, however, as he flew to the US on board his personal jet, the pope bemoaned only the damage done to the Church, not to the victims themselves. The US Catholic Church has paid

out more than \$2 billion in legal settlements to some 13,000 victims, including \$660 million in the Los Angeles diocese alone, and several dioceses have been compelled to file for bankruptcy.

The pope’s closed-door meeting with five sex-abuse victims was presented by Church officials and the media as a major breakthrough, although the five had been carefully vetted by the Boston archdiocese to ensure a relatively harmonious session. A spokesman for the archdiocese said the five had “ongoing relationships” with archdiocesan officials, and had “stayed engaged with the office”—i.e., they had remained loyal to the hierarchy despite the Vatican’s continued defense of Cardinal Bernard Law. As Boston archbishop, Law protected priest-abusers and allowed them to transfer from parish to parish when exposed, rather than removing them from the priesthood.

Benedict even sought to blame the sex-abuse scandal on the excessive sexual permissiveness of modern culture, rather than the repressive practice of priestly celibacy which the Catholic Church, alone of major religious institutions, continues to enforce.

Similar sex-abuse cases have been reported in countries as diverse as the United States, Poland, Mexico, Ireland and Austria. This suggests that the common denominator is not the culture of the specific countries, but the atmosphere prevalent within the Catholic Church as an institution.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* noted when the sex abuse scandal in the United States first came to widespread public attention, some six years ago, “Every aspect of the sexual abuse crisis—the pain and suffering of the victims, the misery and sexual dysfunction of the priests, the callousness of Church officials—suggests a diseased institution whose practices and beliefs run counter to elementary human needs and inevitably breed the unhealthiest of psycho-sexual climates. The Catholic Church’s essential being flies in the face of modern society.”



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