

Sydney's World Youth Day: a spectacle of state-sponsored obscurantism

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An overseas visitor in Sydney this week could well be forgiven for concluding that Catholicism was Australia's state religion. The Catholic Church's World Youth Day '08, which commenced on Tuesday and runs until Sunday, has assumed the character of a state-sponsored religious celebration.

On Tuesday, Labor Prime Minister Kevin Rudd addressed World Youth Day's opening mass, alongside 26 cardinals, 400 bishops and 4,000 priests. He told an estimated 143,000 Catholic pilgrims, assembled at Barangaroo near Darling Harbour, that "Christianity has been an overwhelming force for good in the world".

Rudd's speech to the open-air mass, presided over by Australian Cardinal George Pell, was unprecedented for an Australian prime minister. His open promotion of religious obscurantism and clericalism constitutes an affront to the basic democratic principle of separation between church and state.

"Australia is deeply shaped by and proud of this nation's Christian heritage and future," he claimed. "We honour deeply the great Catholic heritage of Australia as well, deep in its tradition and vital in its future."

In fact, Australia is one of the most secular countries in the world. Less than 27 percent of the population identify themselves as Catholic, and of these, just 14 percent regularly attend mass.

Hailed as a progressive by the "left liberal" establishment during last November's federal election, Rudd used his "pre-mass" remarks to launch an assault on secularism, science and reason: "Some say there is no place for faith in the 21st century," he waxed in the pompous, grating sing-song voice so reminiscent of Tony Blair, "I say they are wrong. Some say faith is the enemy of reason, I say also they are wrong. They are great partners, rich in history and scientific progress."

The prime minister's description of the Catholic Church as a "great partner" in scientific progress is an outrageous falsification of history. The Vatican has formed a central bulwark against reason and science since the time of the Renaissance. This is, after all, the same institution that burned Giordano Bruno at the stake and placed Galileo in the hands of the Inquisition for the heretical crime of preaching that the earth revolved around the sun.

On Monday there was no escaping the blanket media coverage of Pope Benedict XVI's Sydney arrival. Not a stone or papal garment was left unturned. Fairfax and Murdoch journalists who had joined the Vatican press corps on board Shepherd One (the pontiff's private jet) regaled readers with information about the menu. According to the *Sydney Morning Herald's* Paola Totaro, "dishes

included ravioli di ricotta with radicchio, grilled seafood skewers in grappa salsa served with asparagus and carrots, cheese selections, beef fillet with mushrooms and assorted sweets from the boutique Gelato maker Rinaldini".

One searched the *Herald's* front page in vain for news about the most serious financial crisis to confront US and world financial markets since the 1930s—the US Federal Reserve Board's intervention to prop up mortgage giants Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac. Warnings of a global financial meltdown, ongoing military debacles in Afghanistan and Iraq, renewed sabre-rattling against Iran, climate change, rising inflation and the threat of widespread famine due to increased fuel and commodity prices—all were swept aside by pages of dross dedicated to the Pope and the Catholic Church.

A certain mood of disorientation seems to have gripped the political establishment. "Benedict's World Youth Day mission to bring hope to a nation: Pope to relight the fire of faith" proclaimed the front-page of the *Australian*. "The Pope touches down with a message," declared the *Herald*, "Help save the world, Sydney". One is tempted to see in these headlines the congealed wisdom of the editorial staffs at Fairfax and News Limited: something will turn up, a miracle perhaps!

But no miracles have been forthcoming.

The halting remarks delivered by Benedict XVI during a brief mid-flight press conference were testimony to the crisis gripping the Catholic Church. Nothing could hide the Pope's intellectual bankruptcy. The pontiff replied to just five out of dozens of questions submitted to Vatican press officials for vetting a full 24 hours prior.

"[T]here is a crisis [of the Church] in Europe, not so much in America," the pope told reporters. "Australia in its historical configuration is part of the Western World... the West over the past 50 years has seen great success, economic and technological success. But religion has been relegated."

"[P]ledophiles cannot be priests," he declared, a bald acknowledgment of the sexual abuse crisis that has overwhelmed the church.

Monday's tabloid *Daily Telegraph* claimed the Pope's arrival in Sydney had "brought a wave of optimism... sending pilgrims into an excited frenzy". The reality is somewhat different. When Sydney's bid for WYD was awarded in 2005, the Catholic Church claimed more than 200,000 overseas pilgrims would attend. But church officials have successively revised these forecasts, with

numbers shrinking. It appears that just over 100,000 pilgrims have made the journey.

Walking through Sydney's central business district one is struck by the event's aimless quality. Groups of young pilgrims seem almost to drift, without apparent purpose, and one wonders whether they may be lost, not just metaphorically, but literally. In Sydney's outer-suburbs last night, there were groups of African and Pacific Islander pilgrims moving through the cold night air, along a major highway, an area devoid of shops, cafes and restaurants. Thousands are sleeping in school assembly halls and other makeshift accommodation. Dozens, taken unawares by Sydney's overnight winter temperatures, and lacking warm clothes and bedding, have ended up in hospital casualty wards with hypothermia and/or serious influenza.

But the most surprising aspect of World Youth Day is the aggressive promotion of national identity. In the main, pilgrims move about in national groups, draped in their respective flags and national colours. Amid the strains of Ave Maria comes the ugly "Aussie, Aussie, Aussie, Oi, Oi, Oi!!".

The nationalist adornments are no spontaneous outpouring. They are being marketed and sold to young pilgrims by the Catholic Church. The "Official WYD08 Licensed Product Catalogue" features 23 pages of clothing and headwear, religious icons, accessories and widgets, available for sale in Hyde Park. "Show your country pride," the catalogue exhorts. While the Catholic Church claims to be "the universal faith", it functions as a ruthless defender of the capitalist nation-state system, just as it once upheld the local princely fiefdoms of the feudal order.

World Youth Day was established in 1984 by Pope John Paul II as part of efforts to reverse the church's decline. But the institution's medieval teachings and conservative moral values fly in the face of contemporary economic and social life. Its opposition to modernity and science finds expression in Pope Benedict's favourite theoretical hobby-horse, which posits an historical conflict between "moral strength" and technological progress. Tuesday's edition of the *Sydney Morning Herald* carried an interview with 16-year-old Alaskan pilgrim Bobby Desrochers who explained that: "We [had] to make a lot of sacrifices to come here... the big one for us is we weren't allowed to bring cell phones or iPods or anything like that. It's to keep our focus off the new technology and really get our minds set on why we are all here."

An organisation that treats iPods and digital communication with suspicion is incapable of taking root among the twenty-first century's young.

The Iemma Labor government has laid the entire city of Sydney at the disposal of the Catholic Church for WYD, evoking widespread public anger. The CBD has been shut down, hundreds of streets and roads blocked and some 600 "exclusion zones" established by executive order, with draconian regulations controlling freedom of speech and movement. Those businesses forced to shut their doors as a result of the closures have been denied financial compensation.

The state government is bankrolling the Catholic Church's World Youth Day '08 to the tune of \$129 million, with an additional \$20 million contributed by the federal Labor

government. This includes \$10 million for the replacement of grass should it be trampled by pilgrims at Randwick Racecourse during the final papal mass. Not included in this figure are the tens of millions of dollars donated by the government in additional "in-kind" support. Thousands of teachers, in both the state and catholic systems, have been dragooned into unpaid labour as pilgrim monitors, forced to stay overnight in school assembly halls, often without sleep.

While around 100,000 or so pilgrims have arrived in Sydney, such is the parlous state of the city's public transport network that even these numbers threaten a meltdown of the system. For months, the city's four million residents have been urged by government billboards to "Make [WYD] a moving experience... Leave your cars at home." Anecdotal evidence suggests that many workers have decided the safer option is to take any holiday and sick leave entitlements owing and leave the city altogether.

On Tuesday, Murdoch's tabloid *Daily Telegraph* carried a column by NSW Premier Morris Iemma headlined "How God inspires my rule of NSW". This was neither a good advertisement for God nor for the NSW government.

"The Pope comes as a servant and a shepherd who wants to strengthen our faith and commitment through his own wisdom, love and example," Iemma wrote. "That is why Catholics tend to call the Pope by the name Holy Father—or, in Italian, 'Papa'. The word, which means something more like 'daddy', is especially appropriate for the humble, humane and good humoured Benedict XVI."

In fact, the "humble" Benedict has long stood on the extreme right of the Catholic Church. As head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith—the modern-day continuator of the Inquisition, he enforced a series of reactionary positions opposed even among many Catholics. He signed papal decrees attacking contraception, abortion, same-sex marriage, denouncing stem cell research and re-affirming the bar on marriage for priests.

The state sponsorship of WYD and official genuflection toward the Pope speaks to a significant collapse of democratic thought within ruling circles. As with other recent events, including the APEC world leaders' summit, it also points to an ever-widening gulf between the political establishment and the sentiments of ordinary people.



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