

TODAY'S ZAMAN

Impressons upon meeting the pope

by

ZEKİ SARITOPRAK*

Pope Benedict XVI's recent visit to the United States was undoubtedly one of the most important events of the year in the country.

Received with great honor by President George W. Bush and first lady Laura Bush, no amount of splendor was spared in preparations for his visit. There was even a grand banquet held at the White House in honor of his 81st birthday, which he was too busy to attend.



Many foreign dignitaries and heads of state visit Washington, D.C., of course, but the pope's visit is unique in that the pope is not only the head of a state, but also the world's most prominent religious leader. Representing the world of Catholicism and its 1 billion adherents, the pope's visit was a mix of meetings with administrators and church leaders and huge outdoor masses welcoming thousands of worshippers. Catholics from around the country were able to receive tickets through their diocese for his Mass at Nationals Park, which 48,000 people attended. I learned from the attendees that tickets were distributed based on the membership of their diocese: a diocese with approximately 250,000 members would receive only 400 tickets to attend the Mass.

None of this is unusual for a papal visit. What was new and exciting, however, was the pope's inclusion of an inter-religious gathering in his schedule. This demonstrated, I believe, a new openness to dialogue on the part of Pope Benedict XVI. It was a great opportunity for me to be invited to join Muslim scholars and academics from around the country, as well as members of the Jewish, Hindu and Buddhist communities and members of other religions for this groundbreaking event.

Entitled "Peace our Hope," the meeting materials all carried the image of Edward Hicks' painting "Peaceable Kingdom," which depicts the beautiful hope of Isaiah 11:6-9 "The wolf shall live with the lamb" and all of the accompanying imagery of peace and harmony in creation. It is interesting to note that this image appears in Islamic tradition as well, particularly in some sayings of the prophet related to the afterlife and its signs. Of the approximately 150 other participants in this gathering, 25 of us were Muslim. In the wake of the pope's negative remarks about Islam and its prophet at Regensburg University in Germany in 2006, some Muslims felt trepidation about what to expect from this meeting. Any anxiety we may have had was quickly alleviated, however, by the pope's humility and openness, which impressed us all. Not a dynamic or sensational speaker and with a thick German accent often difficult to understand, Benedict XVI was impressive solely on the basis of his message. He emphasized the importance of finding more space for religion in societal life, that religious freedom is a part of human freedom. It seems to me that while his predecessor, John Paul II, struggled against communism, Pope Benedict XVI is struggling against a modern secularism that denigrates religion.

In his speech, the pope quoted former American President Franklin D. Roosevelt,

saying, "No greater thing could come to our land today than a revival of the spirit of faith." He suggested that one of the goals of dialogue between adherents of different religions was to establish a foundation for discussion of essential questions such as "What is the origin and destiny of humankind?" "What are good and evil?" and "What awaits us at the end of our earthly existence?" According to the pope, it is only by addressing these "deeper questions" that we can ensure the peace and security of the human family. "We are living in an age," he said, "when these questions are too often marginalized. Yet they can never be erased from the human heart. Throughout history, men and women have striven to articulate their restlessness with the passing world." Muslims would consider this approach to be very important, because they felt the same way as the pope with regard to modern-day, secularist approaches to religion.

It is clear to me that while the pope is deeply knowledgeable about Western thought and Catholic tradition, he is not overly familiar with other religions. He was warm and welcoming to all of us, particularly the Jewish participants, whose Passover he honored. It appears that he is willing to be a part of inter-religious dialogue insofar as it does not contradict the main tenets of his faith. This is particularly good news for Muslims, who share many common traditions with Catholicism, including a special reverence for Jesus and his mother, Mary. Muslims were honored to hear an expression of our own tradition in the Pope's final words, "Peace upon you all."

After a young Jewish man presented the pope with a menorah, it was a great pleasure for Muslims at the event to see the pope presented with a beautiful Islamic calligraphy containing verse 24:35 from the Quran. Samam Hussein, a young Muslim woman in a headscarf, was chosen to present this gift, which the pope received with great enthusiasm.

The verse reads in Arabic: "Allah is the light of the heavens and the earth; a likeness of His light is as a niche in which is a lamp, the lamp is in a glass, (and) the glass is as it were a brightly shining star, lit from a blessed olive-tree, neither Eastern nor Western, the oil whereof almost gives light though fire touch it not -- light upon light -- Allah guides to His light whom He pleases, and Allah sets forth parables for men, and Allah is Cognizant of all things."

After the meeting, I asked one of the organizers whether the pope had changed. He said, "I think he now believes in the importance of dialogue with Muslims." He went on to say that the most important sign of this is that there will soon be a high-level meeting between 50 Muslim and Catholic scholars at the Vatican, with the pope's approval.

In recent months, a group of Muslim scholars wrote a letter to the pope and other Christian leaders, inviting them to a "common word": love of God, love of neighbors. It seems to me that this gathering between the pope and members of other religious traditions will open the door further to dialogue and cooperation to include more common themes, such as human dignity, justice, freedom of religion and helping the oppressed people around the world. I hope that this meeting and the remarks of Pope Benedict XVI will be an important stepping-stone for the future of Muslim-Christian relations.

* Zeki Saritoprak Ph.D., Nursi chair in Islamic Studies, John Carroll University, Cleveland, Ohio.