

Peace and prosperity

Pope Benedict XVI outsmarted Brown, the British Prime Minister, who replaced Blair, whom I met and spoke with for a few minutes during a recess at the WTO Second Conference in Geneva 10 years ago; it was following his speech and I was expressing my disagreement on the matter of an incorrect sentence he used about the social situation of British children. Brown's voice, positions and tone at his press conference in the presence of Bush, gave me the impression that he is self-assuming as his predecessor in the leadership of the Labor Party. The activities of the new British Prime Minister, coinciding with the Pope's visit, were just like those of a leader of the government of a banana republic.

Benedict XVI paid special attention to April 13th when, 65 years ago, over one thousand prisoners were incinerated in the town of Gardelegen; this became a day remembered in the martyrology suffered by the Jewish people in Nazi Germany, a human tragedy that lasted years.

Bush welcomed him at Andrews Air Force Base in the U.S., an unusual gesture. Benedict XVI, as a German bishop was a conservative who disliked changes in social policies and in the internal norms governing his Church. Initially, the U.S. mainstream press was relentless, due to the irregularities committed contrary to the norms guiding the faithful. They even described the Roman Catholic Church as a decadent religion.

His visit also coincided with his 81st birthday. Bush, thoughtful and indulgent, sang Happy Birthday to him, right on the 16th.

The Pope was, undoubtedly, smart as he started to counterattack from the beginning of his visit. In spite of his 81 years that he would be celebrating a few hours later, he descended from the plane, barely touching the handrails of the steep steps, and by the time he reached the last treads, he was not even doing that. He is a short man who appears to weigh about half of what Bush weighs. He has a light step. He never, for one single minute, abandoned his smile and the sparkle in his eyes, and he immediately set out to follow a schedule that would have exhausted any 18 year-old visitor. Television coverage went wild.

The Pope visited universities, a Catholic cultural centre built just for the occasion; he met with representatives from hundreds of Catholic schools and universities across the huge country. The leader of the empire did not dare ask the Vatican State for "a new constitution and free elections" like he has dreamed up for Cuba.

As the leader of a Church, at a time when a war has been unleashed by the United States against the Muslims, his message was ecumenical and favorable to peace.

He met with representatives of religions whose churches hold influence over billions of people. Jewish leaders received him warmly. Of course, they idealized the capitalist system of the United States. One of the rabbis from Miami said that 90 percent of Jews in Cuba had moved to that city; he should have made it clear that it didn't happen because we were persecuting them or because they were granted U.S. visas, but because they opted for the right to travel legally as offered by the Revolution and, just like many Cubans from other ethnic groups, they were in search of material advantages which they had not been able to attain in colonial Cuba.

Jewish synagogues remained opened and respected here, and their representatives, together with the rest of the churches, have meetings with leaders of the Party and the Revolutionary Government, even at the highest levels.

In the United States, the Pope's visit to a synagogue was greatly praised. It is the third time that a Pope visits those Jewish religious centers. The first time was when John Paul II visited a synagogue in Poland; then, Benedict XVI visited another in Germany; and this one, in New York City, was the first time in this country.

It is particularly important to claim for the right to life in the name of freedom of creed. Benedict XVI addressed the United Nations Organization in his capacity as the religious leader of a powerful church deeply rooted among many peoples of the world:

"...the desire for peace, the quest for justice, respect for the dignity of the person, humanitarian cooperation and assistance - express the just aspirations of the human spirit..."

"...development goals, reduction of local and global inequalities, protection of the environment, of resources and of the climate, require all international leaders to act jointly and to show a readiness to work in good faith, respecting the law, and promoting solidarity with the weakest regions of the planet..."

"Here our thoughts turn also to the way the results of scientific research and technological advances have sometimes been applied."

"[these rights] are based on the natural law inscribed on human hearts and present in different cultures and civilizations."

"...the saying: Do not do to others what you would not want done to you 'cannot in any way vary according to the different understandings that have arisen in the world'..."

"My presence at this Assembly is a sign of esteem for the United Nations, and it is intended to express the hope that the Organization will increasingly serve as a sign of unity between States and an instrument of service to the entire human family."

When he concluded, he exclaimed in English, French, Spanish, Arabic, Chinese and Russian: "Peace and prosperity with God's help!"

Even though it is not easy to decipher the Vatican's thinking on the thorny issues that are being dealt with in a world where the President of the United States and his rich and developed allies have imposed a bloody war against the culture and religion of more than a billion persons in the name of the fight against terrorism, and where torture, pillage and conquest by force of hydrocarbons and raw materials reigns supreme, what the Pope stated is the antithesis of the policy of brutality and force applied by the singer of Happy Birthday.

In the next few days, the peoples of Latin America shall be on the verge of confronting two tragedies: that of Paraguay and that of Bolivia. One of them, through the elections that are being held today, on Sunday April 20, where a former Catholic bishop carries an overwhelming majority of popular support, according to serious surveys, and the rejection of electoral fraud is certain; the other, through the threat of real disintegration of its territory which shall lead to fratricidal struggles in the long-suffering country.

Today, Benedict XIV returns to Rome. The lovely, impressive hymns have ceased in the temples. Now we shall continue to hear the odious and never-ending explosions of weapons.

Fidel Castro Ruz

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