

In Assisi, Pope Benedict follows in John Paul's footsteps

VATICAN CITY - Pope Benedict XVI's recent visit to Assisi was an emblematic event, demonstrating once again that this pontificate is more about continuity than revolution.

For some at the Vatican, Assisi long ago came to represent the excesses of dialogue and the dangers of political activism.

The birthplace of St. Francis was the site of the famous interreligious encounter convened by Pope John Paul II in 1986, when the representatives of 15 faiths assembled in the city's holy places to pray for peace. The absence of Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger - now Pope Benedict - from Assisi that day was interpreted as a self-distancing from the interfaith initiative.

So when Pope Benedict made his own pilgrimage to Assisi June 17, the stage seemed set for a papal corrective or reprimand, and perhaps a change in direction for dialogue.

Instead, the pope made it clear that not only did he consider the 1986 Assisi meeting a prophetic idea and a "moment of grace" but that dialogue with other religions should be considered an essential part of being a Christian.

He spoke of St. Francis as a man of dialogue and peace, recalling how the saint had spoken with "meekness" with the sultan of Egypt, yet without ever hiding his own Christian faith.

In the end, rather than rein in the church's outreach to other religions, the pope gave it strong support.

As usual, he added some qualifiers: Dialogue must never be religious indifferentism; tolerance does not mean suppressing one's own faith convictions; and, for the Christian, respect for others does not negate the duty to announce Christ as the unique savior.

These were the same caveats noted for years by Pope John Paul.

Nor did Pope Benedict have problems with people seeing St. Francis as a special saint for the causes of peace and ecology. The important thing to remember, he said, is that what transformed St. Francis and made him sensitive to these causes was his conversion to Christ.

What distinguished Pope Benedict's Assisi pilgrimage was, in fact, his focus on the person of St. Francis and his relationship to the faith. St. Francis did not find God through social activism, but became a man for others precisely because he was "a man of God," the pope said.

There were obvious parallels with the pope's pilgrimage in April to the northern Italian city of Pavia, where St. Augustine is buried.

The pope chose to highlight these two very different saints because both are examples of dramatic conversion. As young men, they were dedicated in similar ways to material pleasures before an encounter with Christ radically changed their lives.

In Pavia and Assisi, the pope confidently told young people that if they search for deeper meaning in their lives, as Francis and Augustine did, they will find it in Christ and his Gospel. He also warned that this search for deeper meaning and for a space for contemplation is not easy in a world filled with "noisy but empty voices."

Ideally, the pope sees Assisi as a place for this kind of spiritual discovery. With that

in mind, he asked the priests and nuns who operate the Assisi pilgrimage sites to make sure the millions of visitors understand the connection between St. Francis and the faith.

“It’s not enough that they admire Francis: Through him they should be able to encounter Christ,” he said. St. Francis would suffer “a type of mutilation” if he is only appreciated for his social and cultural values and not for his conversion to Christ, he said.

His words reflected a recurring theme of his pontificate: that contemporary society is losing touch with the divine and tends to appreciate the role of the saints or the church strictly in terms of human promotion or social action.

In a similar vein, the pope has warned that even the figure of Christ is often respected for his extraordinary humanity, but rejected by many when it comes to his divine nature.

Franciscan friars are keenly aware that Assisi draws many nondenominational spiritual seekers, who are more responsive to gentle dialogue than formal evangelization. The pope appeared to be nudging them to place a heavier accent on Christ.

Was this a new direction? Not really. When Pope John Paul made his first visit to Assisi in 1978, he made the same point, saying in a prayer to St. Francis: “You who brought Christ so much closer to your era, help us to bring Christ to our own era.”

In Assisi, as in many other ways, Pope Benedict was following in his predecessor’s footsteps.