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May 15th, 2009

Singing away theological differences in Nazareth

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Posted by: Tom Heneghan

Tags: AxisMundi, FaithWorld, buddhism, catholic, christian, holy land, hymn, interfaith, islam, israel, pope benedict, protestant, rabbi, turkey, vatican



(Photo: Pope Benedict with Galilee religious leaders, 14 May 2009/Osservatore Romano)

Talk about a picture being worth 1,000 words. There's more than that behind this picture of Pope Benedict holding hands and singing a song for peace with leaders of other religions in Nazareth's Basilica of the Annunciation on Thursday. This might seem like an innocent gesture to most people who see it. To some Vatican correspondents following the pope on his Holy Land tour, it was an unprecedented step that spoke volumes about the evolution of his theological thinking.

This sing-along started at an interfaith meeting when a rabbi began singing a song with the lyrics "Shalom, Salaam, Lord grant us peace." At some point, the 11 clerics on the stage stood up and held hands to sing the simple tune together. Never very spontaneous, Benedict looked a little hesitant but then joined in. It was something of a "kumbaya session" — a "religious version of *We Are The World*," one colleague quipped — but it was good-natured and well meant. The pope has been preaching interfaith cooperation at every stop on his tour and it seemed appropriate that it culminate in a show of unity among the religions in Galilee.

But wait a minute. This is the same Joseph Ratzinger who, when he was a cardinal heading the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, frowned on Pope John Paul's pray-in with other religions at Assisi in 1986. He even declined to attend what became one of the landmark events of his predecessor's papacy. Catholics cannot pray together with other religions, he argued, because only Catholicism was the true faith and all others were flawed to greater or lesser extents. Praying together carried the risk of syncretism, or mixing religions.

Over the years, Cardinal Ratzinger made several critical comments about other religions, especially Buddhism and Islam (although he is changing there as well). He drew a sharp line between Catholics and other Christians in the 2000 document *Dominus Iesus* that called Protestant denominations deficient and not proper churches. They felt slighted and several said so openly. The only faiths Ratzinger seemed interested in were Orthodox Christianity and Judaism (ironically, given the cool welcome he got in Israel — but that's another story).

Things change when a cardinal becomes a pope. Suddenly, he was no longer just the Vatican's doctrinal watchdog, he was the head of the world's largest church and its smallest country. He was a spiritual leader, a temporal head of state, a major diplomatic figure and one of the most prominent — if not the most prominent — spokesman for religion on the planet. That's a lot to juggle at the same time.

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