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BLOG

VIDEO

May 14, 2009

“Every picture tells a story, especially with the pope”

Posted: 01:51 PM ET

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John L. Allen Jr.
CNN Senior Vatican Analyst

For some time now, people have asked why someone doesn't give the Vatican some PR help. This afternoon, someone finally did – and it was a Jew to boot.

The setting was an inter-faith meeting in Nazareth, the traditional hometown of Jesus and his parents, Joseph and Mary, in the Galilee region of northern Israel. The event brought Pope Benedict XVI together with local leaders of the Christian, Muslim, Jewish and Druze faiths.

As it turned out, the event produced arguably the best visual of the pope's week-long trip to the Middle East. At the end of the brief session, Alon Goshen-Gottstein, a Jew who runs an inter-faith center in Jerusalem, led the assembly in a rousing song he had composed specially for the occasion. It was titled “Salaam, Shalom, Lord Grant Us Peace.”

As the song went on, the religious leaders on stage began to join in, including the pontiff himself. At the end, the rabbis, sheikhs, bishops, and other spiritual leaders rose from their seats and held hands, as the word for peace in various languages was belted out in the hall. Benedict was standing in the center of the group, singing and holding hands with a rabbi and a Druze sheikh.

For a pope who sometimes struggles to think in pictures, it was almost a “John Paul moment,” meaning a symbolic gesture reminiscent of his charismatic predecessor, Pope John Paul II.

Benedict has said repeatedly that he came to the Middle East to promote peace, especially peace among the religions, and this was perhaps the most visibly effective way of communicating that idea in a flash all week.

As it turns out, the pope got a PR assist from Goshen-Gottstein.

After the event broke up, a visibly emotional Goshen-Gottstein said that he had composed the song only in the last 72 hours, after the pope took part in another inter-faith meeting in Jerusalem Monday night. On that occasion, an anti-Israeli rant from a Muslim cleric roiled the waters and cast a pall over the event.

“I was tormented and anguished that this opportunity was being wasted,” he said, referring to the papal trip.

So, he set to work. Using Jewish friends active in planning today's event, Goshen-Gottstein passed along a proposal to the Vatican: Why not have a sing-along for peace today in Nazareth, which would include the iconic moment of hand-holding.

“I told them, you need a visual,” Goshen Gottstein said. “There should be a picture to correct what went wrong.”

“I wanted something that would show religious leaders united, that would be hopeful,” he said.

Goshen-Gottstein added one other detail. Just one hour before the event was to begin, there was no power for his electric piano. Given the way the various pieces fell into place – a normally slow-moving Vatican agreeing to a change in program just 48 hours in advance, electricity being miraculously restored – he couldn't help but feel a bit of divine intervention was involved.



Pope Benedict leaves the Church of Nativity in his pope mobile after celebrating Mass Wednesday in Bethlehem.

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"Let the world remember this moment," Goshen-Gottstein said.

Benedict winds up his week-long swing through the Middle East tomorrow, and this afternoon seemed to get the pope back on track after what had been a mixed reception in Israel. All it took was some PR savvy from an unlikely source.

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Maria E Palmares May 14th, 2009 3:11 pm ET
I am a Catholic and I am proud of the Pope!

David Gibson May 14th, 2009 4:24 pm ET
Oh, her in her long flowing robes, surrounded by all those so-called straight non-sexual men with all those priceless antiques and riding around in that ridiculous pope mobile . . . who does she think she's kidding?

aamer trambu May 15th, 2009 12:59 am ET
wow!

Now thats a really powerful and positive gesture.

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