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OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

A Challenge, Not a CrusadeBy **JOHN L. ALLEN Jr.**

SEEN in context, Pope Benedict XVI's citation last week of a 14th-century Byzantine emperor who claimed that the Prophet Muhammad brought "things only evil and inhuman" to the world was not intended as an anti-Islamic broadside. The pope's real target in his lecture at the University of Regensburg, in Germany, was not Islam but the West, especially its tendency to separate reason and faith. He also denounced religious violence, hardly a crusader's sentiment.

The uproar in the Muslim world over the comments is thus to some extent a case of "German professor meets sound-bite culture," with a phrase from a tightly wrapped academic argument shot into global circulation, provoking an unintended firestorm.

In fact, had Benedict wanted to make a point about Islam, he wouldn't have left us guessing about what he meant. He's spoken and written on the subject before and since his election as pope, and a clear stance has emerged in the first 18 months of his pontificate. Benedict wants to be good neighbors, but he's definitely more of a hawk on Islam than was his predecessor, John Paul II.

The new pope is tougher both on terrorism and on what the Vatican calls "reciprocity" — the demand that Islamic states grant the same rights and freedoms to Christians and other religious minorities that Muslims receive in the West. When Benedict said in his apology on Sunday that he wants a "frank and sincere dialogue," the word "frank" was not an accident. He wants dialogue with teeth.

Roman Catholicism under Benedict is moving into a more critical posture toward Islamic fundamentalism. That could either push Islam toward reform, or set off a global "clash of civilizations" — or, perhaps, both.

Personally, Benedict's graciousness toward Muslims is clear. For example, when Ayatollah Mohammad Emami Kashani, a member of the powerful Guardian Council in Iran, wrote a book comparing Islamic and Christian eschatological themes in the 1990's, Benedict, then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, swapped theological ideas with him in the Vatican.

Immediately after his installation Mass last year, Benedict thanked Muslims for attending an inter-faith meeting. "I express my appreciation for the growth of dialogue between Muslims and Christians," he said. "I assure you that the church wants to continue building bridges of friendship with the followers of all religions."

Yet Benedict has also challenged what he sees as Islam's potential for extremism, grounded in a literal reading of the Koran. In a 1997 interview with me, he said of Islam, "One has to have a clear understanding that it is not simply a denomination that can be included in the free realm of pluralistic society."

In the same interview, he accused some Muslims of fomenting a radical "liberation theology," meaning a belief that God approves of violence to achieve liberation from Israel. He also said he opposed Turkey's candidacy to enter the European Union, arguing that it is "in permanent contrast to Europe" and suggesting that it play a leadership role among Islamic states instead.

Thus it's no surprise that Benedict has struck a different tone from his predecessor. John Paul met with Muslims more than 60 times, and during a 2001 trip to Syria became the first pope to enter a mosque. He reached out to Islamic moderates. He talked of Muslims and Jews along with Christians as the three "sons of Abraham." And he condemned injustices thought to be at the root of Islamic terrorism.

Desire for a more muscular stance, however, has been building among Catholics around the world for some time. In part, it has been driven by persecution of Christians in the Islamic world, like the murder of an Italian missionary, the Rev. Andrea Santoro,

in Trabzon, Turkey, in February. A 16-year-old Turk fired two bullets into Father Santoro, shouting “God is great.” But perhaps the greatest driving force has been the frustrations over reciprocity. To take one oft-cited example, while Saudis contributed tens of millions of dollars to build Europe’s largest mosque in Rome, Christians cannot build churches in Saudi Arabia. Priests in Saudi Arabia cannot leave oil-industry compounds or embassy grounds without fear of reprisals from the mutawa, the religious police. The bishop of the region recently described the situation as “reminiscent of the catacombs.”

The pope is sympathetic to these concerns, as several developments at the Vatican have made clear.

At a meeting with Muslims in Cologne, Germany, last summer, Benedict urged joint efforts to “turn back the wave of cruel fanaticism that endangers the lives of so many people and hinders progress toward world peace.”

On Feb. 15, he removed Archbishop Michael Fitzgerald, who had been John Paul’s expert on Islam, as the president of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, sending him to a diplomatic post in Egypt. Archbishop Fitzgerald was seen as the Vatican’s leading dove in its relationship with Muslims.

That same month, Bishop Rino Fisichella, the rector of Rome’s Lateran University and a close papal confidant, announced it was time to “drop the diplomatic silence” about anti-Christian persecution, and called on the United Nations to “remind the societies and governments of countries with a Muslim majority of their responsibilities.”

In March, Cardinal Camillo Ruini, the pope’s vicar for Rome, voiced doubts about calls to teach Islam in Italian schools, saying he wanted assurance that doing so “would not give way to a socially dangerous kind of indoctrination.”

And on March 23, Benedict summoned his 179 cardinals for a closed-doors business session. Much conversation turned on Islam, according to participants, and there was agreement over taking a tougher stance on reciprocity.

Through his statements and those of his proxies, Benedict clearly hopes to stimulate Islamic leaders to express their faith effectively in a pluralistic world. The big question is whether it will be received that way, or whether it simply reinforces the conviction of jihadists about eternal struggle with the Christian West.

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