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Pope Speaks in Malta But Sex Abuse By Priests Yet to be Addressed

Sabina Castelfranco



Pope Benedict XVI drives past faithful on his popemobile as he arrives in Valletta, Malta, 17 Apr 2010

Pope Benedict arrived in the Mediterranean island of Malta Saturday to commemorate the 1,950th anniversary of the shipwreck of Saint Paul. He received a warm welcome in this strongly Catholic nation and encouraged missionaries to continue in "their challenging and often heroic vocation."

Thousands of children welcomed Pope Benedict in Saint George's Square in front of the Palace of the Grand Masters in Valletta. They waved white and yellow flags and cheered when the pope arrived.

Despite flight disruptions all over Europe, Pope Benedict's flight managed to depart from Rome and arrive in Malta. Soon after landing he addressed those assembled to welcome him at the airport.

He spoke of how Malta contributed so much to the defense of Christianity by land and by sea and how it continues to play a valuable role in the ongoing debates on European identity, culture and policy.

In a country where over 95 percent of the population is Catholic, he also addressed the issues of divorce and abortion, both of which are prohibited on the island. "Your Nation should continue to stand up for the indissolubility of marriage as a natural institution as well as a sacramental one, and for the true nature of the family, just as it does for the sacredness of human life from conception to natural death," he said.

After separate meetings with President George Abela and Prime Minister Lawrence Gonzi, the pope traveled to Rabat to visit the Grotto of Saint Paul. It is here, that according to tradition, the Apostle Paul and his fellow companions chose to live during the three months he was shipwrecked on the island in the year 60 A.D.

Pope Benedict said that shipwreck and Paul's stay in Malta left an indelible mark upon its history. The pope addressed the many missionaries gathered in the Church of Saint Paul. "Paul's apostolic labors also bore a rich harvest in the generations of preachers who followed in his footsteps, and particularly in the great number of priests and religious who imitated his missionary zeal by leaving Malta in order to bring the Gospel to distant shores," he said.

On Sunday the pope is scheduled to celebrate an open air mass in Valletta. But the question in many people's minds is whether Benedict will decide to meet privately with victims of clerical sex abuse in Malta that have asked for an encounter with him.
