

# Coverage misses what traveling pope says

By Father Richard P. McBrien  
Syndicated columnist

With his recent eight-day visit to Mexico — his second trip to that country since his election in 1978 — Pope John Paul II continues his exhausting schedule of pilgrimages and pastoral visitations all around the world.

Each of these trips has several components: round-trip flights; airport greetings; motorcades; meetings with government officials and other dignitaries; meetings with local bishops, religious and lay groups; visits to hospitals, orphanages, poor neighborhoods and the like; celebration of the Eucharist in churches, open fields and stadiums; and speeches — hundreds and hundreds of them.

For many people absorbed in a visual culture dominated by television, a papal visit is comprised only of airport

ceremonies, motorcades and outdoor Masses. Those are what make the evening news in 30-second spots or less.

Almost never are the pope's speeches highlighted. A few of them are reported in the print media, but television, not the press, shapes the public's perception of what's important.

Without denying that what the Pope *does* is of great importance, I should suggest that many Catholics miss the full significance of these papal trips because they ignore, or are simply unaware of, what the Pope *says* during them.

Catholics of one type (let's call them conservative or traditional, for want of better terms) readily applaud the pope's penchant for far-flung travel.

They tingle with pride at the sight of world and national leaders bowing before the pope, and of the white-robed Successor

of Peter, regally erect in his glass-encased "pope-mobile," blessing the cheering throngs of well-wishers all along the motorcade route, or presiding in wind-blown vestments at a Mass attended by hundreds of thousands of people.

But these same conservative Catholics tend to pay little or no attention to what the pope says on such occasions, especially his prophetically pointed and consistently emphatic exhortations on social and economic justice.

Catholics of another type (let's call them liberal or progressive, for want of better terms), tend to be critical of the pope's pastoral globe-hopping.

Their reasons vary: the trips are too costly or too triumphalistic.

To the extent that these liberal Catholics pay any attention to what the pope says during these trips, they somehow manage



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to notice only his predictable reaffirmations of church teaching on birth control and abortion.

Both groups of Catholics render their judgments about papal trips on the basis of partial evidence only.

Take again, for example, the pope's recent visit to Mexico.

On May 9 in Durango, he delivered himself of a devastating critique of modern capitalism, so cherished by his neo-conservative admirers in the United States.

The collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe, he said, does not mean that capitalism has triumphed. On the contrary, he chastised capitalism for having neglected its ethical responsibilities.

He accused capitalists of pursuing profits "at any price," at the expense of workers' rights, social justice and the environment.

"The excessive hoarding of riches by some," the pope declared, "denies them to the majority, and thus the very wealth that is accumulated generates poverty."

Liberal Catholics should applaud those papal words, but they either don't hear or don't believe he means them. Conservative Catholics, on the other hand, should take those words to heart, but they close their ears to them instead.

The very next day in Chihuahua, the pope preached another hard sermon, but this time about birth control and abortion.

"If the possibility of conceiving a child is artificially eliminated in the conjugal act," he said, "couples shut themselves off from God and oppose His will."

Invigorating words for conservative Catholics; off-putting words for liberal Catholics. But, again, neither side is really listening.

If only the pope could find a way to make his strongest supporters really listen to what he is saying about social and economic justice. It would be good for them because it would test their loyalty not only to him but to the Gospel itself.

But it would also be good for his critics because then they might begin to realize that there is more to this pope than meets the eye — the left eye or the right eye.

# Spectacular sign returns Israel to God

By Cindy Bassett  
Courier columnist

People from even the outlying regions of Israel had come to view the spectacle on Mount Carmel. Today, the prophet Elijah stood alone on one side of the mountain facing King Ahab and the 850 prophets of Queen Jezebel who worshipped Baal.

"People of Israel," Elijah said as he came forward to address the large crowd, "it is time to make a decision about your lives. You must choose, once and for all, who is your God. If the Lord is your God, follow Him and stop worshipping Baal. If your god is Baal, follow him."

No one offered any kind of answer to Elijah. They waited to see what was going to happen next.

"Select two bulls for a sacrifice," Elijah told the prophets of Baal. "One of these bulls will be for each of us to prepare a sacrifice to our God. You may prepare your sacrifice first. Each one of us will have a chance to invoke our God. The one who answers with fire to light the sacrifice is the one true God. Do you agree to these terms?"

The prophets of Baal accepted Elijah's offer immediately. Since they worshipped Baal as the god of fire, they were certain



that their prayers would be answered. At first, the prophets simply prayed. When it was noon and there was still no response, however, they began to dance around the altar in a frenzy. Even so, they heard nothing.

"Perhaps you should speak louder!" Elijah taunted. "Maybe Baal is sleeping or away on a trip!"

When evening came and the sacrifice to Baal remained unlit despite the fervent pleadings of the prophets, Elijah said to the crowd, "It is time to call on the God of Israel."

Elijah first asked some of the people there to bring 12 stones to make an altar. Each stone symbolized one of the tribes of Israel. After he had prepared the bull for the sacrifice on the altar, he instructed them to build a trench around it.

"Fill the trench completely with water,"

Elijah said. "Pour water over everything, even the sacrifice."

Everyone on the mountain wondered how a fire could ever be ignited. When Elijah was ready to pray to God, he spoke aloud so that everyone could hear his words.

"O, Lord, I have done everything that you have commanded me. Hear me, today, so that everyone will know that you are the one true God. Turn their hearts back to you again."

It was a spectacular response. A lightning bolt pierced through the sky over the mountain. It ignited the sacrifice with a fire that was so intense that it consumed everything. The water in the trench was gone and even the 12 stones.

The people began to chant. "The Lord is God! The Lord is God!"


Then they seized all the prophets of Baal and killed them. King Ahab was stunned. Elijah told him, "Go home now. The rains are going to start soon."

**Scripture reference:** 1 Kings 18:20-46.  
**Meditation:** "No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other" (Matthew 6:24).

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