

THE VATICAN AND TURKEY ON THE EVE OF POPE BENEDICT'S VISIT

The visit of Pope Benedict XVI takes place under conditions of great tension which did not obtain when his predecessor, John Paul I, visited Turkey nearly thirty years ago. This is largely because of unresolved disputes in the 1990 between the Vatican and Turkey over issues of legal recognition of Catholic churches in Turkey and their ownership. The article recommends modernization of the style of Vatican external representation and new Turkish legislation guaranteeing that foreign churches can operate freely and own their building are recommended to defuse tension in a relationship stretching back many hundreds

sequence of the Pope's remarks seems to have been a rise in hostility toal visits

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Earlier Popes in Turkey

Papal visits to Turkey seem to have been always controversial. If we leave St. Peter's time in Antioch during the twilight of the first century A.D. to one side, the first Pope to visit Istanbul, Martin I, arrived there in the year 654 as a prisoner in chains of the Byzantine Emperor Constans II and was "exposed to the jests and insults of a curious crowd of spectators" as a modern writer puts it.¹

More than thirteen centuries followed before the next visit. The visit of Paul VI in the summer of 1967 was one of the earliest of the now familiar high profile modern international papal visits and it was undoubtedly made because of the presence in Turkey of Ephesus and other Christian sites. Paul VI's visit is still notable in some Catholic eyes for the fact that during it the Pope delivered a speech in Latin. At the time of the visit, the Turkish press was more concerned by the fact that he briefly genuflected and said a short prayer in Istanbul's Ayasofya Museum, simultaneously offending both Islamic traditionalists who regard the building as a mosque and Turkey's modernists who wish the building to be regarded simply as a museum and a cultural center.

John Paul II's visit in 1979 was less controversial -though it generated few crowds and the rightwing newspaper *Tercüman* articulated some local misgivings by referring to the visitor as "head Christian". In a speech to the miniscule community of local Christians in Ankara, John Paul II contrasted their minority condition with that of the early Christians, pointing out that in every respect present-day Turkish Christians fare better for they live in a society which shares many of their religious values.

Less than two years later, relations between Turkey and the Catholic Church took an unexpected turn when Mehmet Ali Ağca, an extreme rightwing nationalist Turk, shot and nearly killed John Paul II while the Pope was blessing the crowds in St. Peter's Square. Ağca's motives for this action are still highly controversial but in the view of this writer, who reported on the event at the time, they were most probably linked to political tensions inside Turkey at the time rather than to a grand conspiracy by the former Warsaw Pact nations. However Ağca's reported remarks immediately after his arrest -that he was a Turkish Armenian- suggest that at some level he saw his actions as part of the confrontation between Christianity and Islam.

Pope Benedict XVI will begin his visit under much more inauspicious circumstances than either of his recent predecessors. His remarks in August 2004 that Turkey "existed in permanent contrast to Europe" and his clear implication that the country was not eligible to join the European Union have naturally not been forgotten. Nor has the more recent furor created in September 2006 across the Muslim world by his remarks at Regensburg University.² To many this visit seems to be adding fuel to the flames of two dangerous confrontations.

¹ Catholic Encyclopaedia, *Pope Martin I*, (New York, 1910)

² Discussing the relation between religion and violence, Pope Benedict quoted the Byzantine Emperor Manuel II Palaeologus: "'Show me just what Mohammed brought that was new, and there you will find things only evil and inhuman, such as his command to spread by the sword the faith he preached".

Turkey and the Catholic Church under the Ottoman Empire

Turkish-Catholic relations stretch back to the Middle Ages and have gone through many phases. In all of them the ultimate -though very distant- goal of the papacy or Vatican has been the reunion of eastern Christians under the leadership of Rome. In that sense, the emphasis on the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate underlying Pope Benedict XVI's visit in November 2006 is directly continuous with previous phases of papal policies towards Turkey. As an American historian remarks: "Roman attitudes towards both the Ottoman Sultans and the Christian subjects had fluctuated considerably over the centuries. From hostility to friendship, from crusading bulls to welcoming Turkish delegations to Rome...Pragmatic rather than ideological concerns were always paramount."³

The story of Catholic-Vatican relations begins with the apogee of Ottoman military power around the time of the conquest of Istanbul when southern Italy and Rome itself faced possible attacks from invading Ottoman armies. A famous member of the Ottoman family, Cem Sultan, was held prisoner in Rome for six years in the late fifteenth century by Popes Innocent VII and Alexander VI and in effect used as a bargaining counter against the Ottomans. But in later centuries Ottoman power declined, and the Catholics like other Christian denominations benefited from the all-but-colonial control the Western powers had over the empire in its final phase.

Bestowing firmans

Later the papacy began its long history of direct relations with the Ottomans, its dealings centering on issues surrounding Catholic communities from the Balkans to the Middle East, including a number in Istanbul itself. Whenever permission could be obtained, priests were sent to the Ottoman lands to serve particular local communities. They operated within the legal framework of treaties between France and the Empire and the Capitulations, or special privileges accorded to westerners. Individual privileges were bestowed by imperial *firmans* (decrees) from particular Sultans, conferring permanent rights on particular churches and communities. Successive Sultans thus gradually became accustomed to working with a free-standing religious institution whose main concerns were the protection of its relatively small numbers of followers and wooing converts from among Ottoman Christians.

In some ways Ottoman-Catholic relations before 1800 are not entirely unlike those the Catholic church had in China, but in Turkey, because of the resolutely Islamic nature of the state, Catholic priests never gained direct or regular access to the imperial court as advisers, scientists, or artists as they did in seventeenth and eighteenth century Beijing. Moreover in the early phases of relations, a reversal of policy could mean the execution even of senior emissaries. These events have to be seen in the context of the times: Periodic outbreaks of hostility to the clergy in the Ottoman Empire tend to be reported by later historians through the prism of "the clash of civilizations." But such incidents were much fewer and less systematic than executions of Catholic clergy in (say) England at the same period; where the Catholic clergy were unable to operate legally before the nineteenth century. Remember too that conversions to Islam would have merited the death penalty across Europe, perhaps especially in the Papal States.

³ Charles A. Frazee, *Catholics and Sultans 1453-1923*, (Cambridge 1983), p.238.

Fear of mass sentiment

During this early period, the strict restraints of Islamic law applied to Catholic churches as to other non-Muslim communities. Contemporary accounts also stress the degree to which clergy and local Christians both feared anti-Christian sentiment among the Muslim masses and were sometimes attacked by agitators. An English traveller, Harry Cavendish, visiting Istanbul in 1589 observed that the “inhabitants [were] rude and proud and veary malysyous towards Crystans, tearing of them dogs”⁴ There was thus a dichotomy between the relations which churches and clergy enjoyed with the Ottoman state authorities, which in normal times were satisfactory, and popular lower class Muslim hostility.

The Later Ottoman and Ecclesiastical Expansion

After 1800 this confrontational picture changed dramatically as the Ottoman Empire began to look west. Trade and economic development increased the numbers of Catholics by attracting Italian and Maltese families into the large cities of the Empire. Catholic Armenians were given their own *Millet* or religious communal organization in the 1830’s. During the same decade, the Sultan Mahmud II embraced the principle of legal equality of all his subjects regardless of their religion, saying that he would henceforth recognize Muslims only in the mosque, Christians only in the church, and Jews only in the synagogue.⁵

The Hattı Hümayun of February 1856 enshrined legal equality in law and removed traditional restrictions such as those on building of churches. Schools were established at which the attendance of non-Catholics, including Ottoman Muslims, gradually became accepted. In some areas of the empire however -for instance the Lebanon in 1860- the toleration edict offended the sensibilities of the Muslim masses and provoked a violent reaction.

During this period, relations between the Vatican and the Ottoman government were increasingly warm even though the Ottoman Foreign Ministry in 1870⁶ declined to offer diplomatic recognition to the papal Nunciature or representative in Istanbul which had been established two years earlier, the move evidently reflecting the caution of the Grand Vizier A’ali Pasha (a westernizer who was fully aware of the potential for Turkish policy of ecclesiastical politics: in the same year A’ali authorized the Bulgarian Exarchate) about the risks of offending Muslim sentiment.

During the crisis of the Ottoman Empire in 1876 and 1877, the elderly Pope Pius IX however was one of the empire’s relatively small numbers of friends in Europe. Malcolm MacColl, a British arch-turcophobe wrote in disgust to William Gladstone on 23 August 1876 about papal favorability towards Turkey, noting that “The conduct of the Pope is about as bad as that of the Turkish government [and] in some respects worse.”⁷

The upheavals of World War One brought an end to Ottoman multiculturalism. France, the traditional protector of Catholics in Turkey and the source of most of the clergy serving there, was one of the principal enemy powers. The indigenous non-Muslim population which the

⁴ Frazee, *op.cit*, p.72. (wrote in archaic English)

⁵ Edouard Engelhardt, *La Turquie et le Tanzimat, ou, histoire des réformes dans l’Empire Ottoman depuis 1826 jusqu’à nos jours*, Vol. 1, (Paris, 1884,) p.5

⁶ The year the Italians ended papal rule in Rome.

⁷ Gladstone Papers, British Library, ADD 44243. August 23.

Catholic clergy had worked among largely disappeared from the Anatolian landscape. A secular Republic replaced the Ottoman monarchy.

The Catholic Church in the Secular Republic

The Ottoman legal system disappeared with the sultans. By 1926, new commercial, penal, and civil codes were in force, directly borrowed from those of western European states. The new state was declared to be secular. The religion of the majority of the population, Sunni Islam, was administered through a department of state, the Presidency of Religious Affairs.

During the first decade and a half of the Republic, all forms of religious education were banned in Turkey. It was widely held that the religion of the masses, and in particular religious resistance to innovation and westernization, was essentially a form of backwardness responsible for the retardation and decline of the Ottoman Empire and the mortal dangers that Turkey had experienced as a result. These beliefs were not new to Turkey: They had in fact been held by a growing proportion of the country's administrative classes for several decades before the fall of the Ottoman Empire.

The legal situation of many non-Sunni religious institutions in the new Republic became a grey area. The position of the Greek Orthodox, Armenians, and Jews has occupied the political foreground and so was touched on in several international agreements including the 1924 Treaty of Lausanne, though none of them was specifically named in it. The legal situation of foreign churches, as mentioned earlier, usually rested on individual *firmands*. Did these continue to be valid under the Republic or had they lapsed? The issue was, and remains an important one, because, as their rights rested on *firmands* and imperial decree, church buildings had not needed and had never been issued with *tapular*, land title deeds. Their ownership was thus potentially open to dispute in the courts some day.

By the late twenties, there was no formal papal representative in Turkey. An attempt to revive the Nunciature in Istanbul, i.e. outside the orbit of the Republic, between 1923 and 1925 was short-lived. But in the wake of the demise of the Ottoman Empire, a new definition was needed for foreign churches in Turkey. Since the churches were closely associated with the forces which had so recently attempted to partition Turkey and eliminate it from the international community, and, as a result of the upheavals, most of their community had disappeared, circumstances were not propitious.

Discussion in the mid-1920s were held about introducing new primary legislation to regulate the situation of foreign churches. It seems that on the advice of the French Embassy of the day, the churches declined to accept the deal that they were offered. As a result no legislation of any sort was introduced. The foreign churches were not confiscated but neither were they encouraged. In some cases churches simply fell down and disappeared. The strongest safeguard was for them to continue as diplomatic premises, under diplomatic protection with their clergy regarded as officials of their national embassies -a situation which has continued to the present day. When the last indigenous Armenian church in Ankara collapsed in the 1930s, applications to rebuild it went unanswered and until the 1940s an Armenian priest, Fr. Çorapçıyan, visited the town in Ankara from Istanbul and held services in private houses. Catholic local Christians in the city however were catered for by the Church of St. Theresa's, set up for this purpose in 1924 by an agreement between the French and Ottoman Governments. St. Theresa's bears to this day an inscription on its door saying that it is the

chancellery of the Embassy of France. In the absence of churches of their own, most church-going local Christians for the last half century have attended this Catholic church⁸

Diplomacy, Secularism and Society in Turkey and Rome

Religion however never seems to have surfaced as a major issue in the international relations of the early Turkish Republic. The country was governed by a secularized western elite, whose members seem to have devoted no thought to potential issues raised by the miniscule foreign ecclesiastical communities. Both this elite and the clergy of churches such as St. Theresa's were concerned not to antagonize the social *mores* of the surrounding lower class population.

In February 1929, Mussolini's government reached an agreement with the Papacy to heal the rift which had existed since the Italian seizure of Rome from the Papacy in 1870. The Vatican State was created and began to restructure its international relations on the basis of the recognition it now enjoyed. The change opened the way for the revival of the Nunciature to Turkey as a Vatican Embassy. In 1935 Archbishop Angelo Roncalli, the future Pope John XXIII, was appointed as the first nuncio-ambassador. His time in Turkey is remembered as one of the early successes of an outstanding career. Roncalli served for nearly a decade and quickly established a close diplomatic partnership with the Turkish Government of the day.⁹ The secular Turkish Republic and the totally theocratic Vatican state quickly became good friends. This was relatively easy since they had few if any problems to divide them. The tiny number of Catholics in Republican Turkey meant that the Vatican was less concerned with the local church in Turkey than with international issues, including wartime issues of refugee assistance. In Turkish eyes the Vatican Ambassador had become one of the mainstays of the Ankara diplomatic community.

Roncalli left Turkey at the end of 1944. At that date Ankara was still the small elitist capital of an agrarian country, but things were about to change drastically. The following half century saw first the introduction of multiparty democracy, the rise of an industrial economy, the shift of the majority of the population from the countryside to the towns, and decline of political secularism, and revival of Islamist politics in Turkey. In the rest of the world there was a decline in religious exclusivity and the erosion of traditional authority.

This religious change was not paralleled inside Turkey where traditional religion made a comeback in several stages. From the 1950s onwards, Sunni Islam established itself as a powerful quasi-official religion inside a secular state structure with access both to substantial amounts of budget funding and public acknowledgement. Its senior officials, as in the Ottoman Empire, are often men of great intellectual ability and dignity, and these days many of them hold doctorates and other qualifications from Western universities.

Many of the restrictions which applied to other forms of Islam were gradually relaxed and disappeared. The powerful Islamic brotherhoods, or *tarikats*, continue to operate in secret

⁸ Information in this paragraph comes from several sources: A western ambassador in Ankara and long-term foreign residents in the capital living there from the 1940s onwards. Research on the origins of St. Theresa's around the time of the Lausanne settlement would cast considerable light on the issues discussed here.

⁹ The British writer Osman Streater gives an affectionate account of the close friendship between the future pope and his great-uncle, Numan Menemencioglu, the then Turkish Foreign Minister, in *The Monsignor and the Minister in Cornucopia*, No.24, 2001. See also Peter Hebblethwaite, *John XXIII Pope of the Century*, revised edition, London 2001. Roncalli was also appointed to Greece.

though the secularist laws against them have long been dropped and their members are no longer arrested for belonging to illegal organizations as they were in the 1960s and 1970s.

Nevertheless Sunni Islam remains, the only religion, Muslim or Christian, which has the right to train clergy in Turkey.¹⁰ This is a tangible manifestation of a tendency in the media and elsewhere to assume that everyone in the country is Sunni and wishes to live by Sunni social and religious rules. As a British writer has pointed out¹¹, Islam, in the form of Sunni Islam, possesses privileges and public status in Turkey in the early twenty first century not enjoyed by established religions in western European societies. However this is not the whole story. The revived ascendancy of Sunni Islam in Turkish society and politics was accompanied by a social trend in an altogether different direction: The emergence of a western-style urban mass society with internationally familiar orientations from fast food to fashion, and music. In other words the whole gamut of post-traditional lifestyle secularism had taken root in the country. This was a new form of secularist mass culture, growing out of though distinct from, the positivistic secularism of early twentieth century Turkey. This is what makes Turkish society singular in the Islamic world and it is a direct legacy of the reforms of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. It is also an environment in which traditional mass animosity against Christians has largely disappeared.

Turkey and the European Union and the Vatican

In April 1987 Turkey applied for full membership of the EU, then the European Community. The application was unsuccessful: After a two years delay, the EC decided not to open negotiations. The application nevertheless was followed by a “Copernican revolution” in European attitudes towards Turkey. EC member states changed drastically. Before 1987 it is probably fair to say that Western European governments generally abstained from adversely commenting on human rights issues in Turkey. After 1987 this position changed, human rights and related issues came on to the diplomatic agenda, and it was only a matter of time before religious freedoms were added to the list.

The Vatican Embassy was not part of this process. In the spring of 1989, for example, the Nuncio of the day asked the Turkish Government to ban the video clip of Madonna’s song *Like a Prayer* on the grounds that it was offensive to Catholics -thus advocating a restriction on freedom of expression no longer possible in Western European countries.

But by the mid-1990’s the Embassy was strongly concerned by another issue, that of recognition of the Catholic Church in Turkey. The revival of the Turkish economy from 1980 onwards had put pressure on apparently vacant sites in large cities -including those occupied by defunct or little used church congregations. At the same time, the rise of political Islam in Turkey meant that local pressures against such churches were also strong.

The Nunciature’s mindset remained that of traditionalist and perhaps blinkered Italian clergy. When in 1991 the Turkish press reported that local extreme nationalists were harassing a priest at a church in Adana, the Vatican Embassy refused to discuss the matter with either Turkish or international journalists and when a report on the news appeared in the influential

¹⁰ As of 2002, 71,583 students were studying in Lycée level (i.e. 16-18 year old) in 558 vocational religious clergy training schools according to the Ministry of Education. This figure probably under-reflects the actual amount of religious education available.

¹¹ David Shankland, *Islam and Society in Turkey*, (London, 1999), Chapter One.

UK weekly *'The Tablet'*, the London Nuncio informed the magazine's Editor that he regretted that this news had appeared "because of its sensitivity."

A similar reticence accompanied the Nunciature's attempt to fight off the proposed confiscation of a small Catholic Church in the central Anatolian town of Konya in the 1990s. The present writer was present when a group of ambassadors and others informally discussed the matter with the Nuncio of the day and unsuccessfully urged him to discuss the matter in public with the Turkish press and bring it into the open.

The Konya church was not confiscated in the end, though it would appear (no public pronouncement seems to have been made) that other church property in the Bebek district (in Istanbul) was taken. In both cases the justification was the absence of official documentation for the status of the Catholic church. In Konya, the local authorities argued that since the Assumptionist Order of priests which owned the church had not been recognized in the 1860s when it was built, it could not be owned by them. In the Istanbul case, the lack of a title (*tapu*) deed seems to have been sufficient for ownership to be lost.

Not surprisingly attitudes hardened and during the mid-1990s the Vatican Embassy canvassed the Turkish authorities as hard as it could to obtain official recognition. It was a wholly unique situation. The type of recognition being sought does not exist in most western European countries. To supply it, primary legislation would have been required. That would have meant the introduction of a law to allow Christian institutions to own land at a time when lower class Islamic revivalism was gaining speed and ordinary Turks of all outlooks were increasingly conscious of European prejudice against them and their country.

The status of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate further complicated matters. Much of the nationalist press regarded the patriarchate as an alien presence on Turkish soil, representing either a Byzantine survival or a Modern Greek intrusion. The spiritual role of the patriarchate for eastern Christians, and the tendency in the West to accept its spiritual titles as cultural facts was regarded by many Turks as potentially dangerous -and there were frequent warnings of a possible Greek Orthodox "Vatican" mushrooming up on Turkish soil. This impacted on the Vatican itself and its embassy in Turkey. Its determination to assume residual temporal status boomeranged upon it.

The Bosnian War exacerbated a shift in attitudes -even though Pope John Paul II attempted to visit the stricken land during the fighting and show solidarity with war victims of all creeds, being restrained only by heavy British and French diplomatic pressure.

EU officials in Ankara were initially slow to realize that the situation of Christians and Catholics in Turkey, and the question of church recognition, would become part of the public agenda between Turkey and the EU. However as the news from Ankara fed back into Catholic and Christian Democrat groups in Europe, claims that there was "no religious freedom in Turkey" began to grow.¹² By 2006 Christian Democrat politicians visiting Ankara were placing the item high on their agendas.

¹² This claim echoes public remarks made by the last Nuncio to Ankara.

The Vatican comes out against Turkey's EU Application

Though the first forerunner of the European Union was established by the Treaty of Rome, the papacy had no role in the Union, around half of whose population is Protestant. Religion is (despite some Catholic and Evangelical protests) not mentioned in the draft European Constitution.

Pope John Paul II seems to have been a clear supporter of Turkish membership of the EU. It was he who coined the expression "the European vocation of Turkey". But below him in the Vatican hierarchy attitudes were changing, no doubt largely because of the despatches coming out of Ankara.¹³

The changes were led by the future Benedict XVI who in an interview with the French conservative paper *Le Figaro* in August 2004 came out unmistakably against the idea of any European vocation for Turkey, including EU membership. Turkey had always been "a country in permanent contrast to Europe." "In the course of history, Turkey has always represented a different continent," Ratzinger said, "Making the two continents identical would be a mistake. It would mean a loss of richness, the disappearance of the cultural to the benefit of economics."

Others follow Ratzinger's trail-blazing

These remarks were made only four months before the European leaders were due to make a final decision on whether to start accession negotiations with Turkey. The timing may have been coincidental, but it proved to be perfect for an attempted derailment of the Turkish candidacy. Cardinal Ratzinger's remarks to *Le Figaro* were a landmark. It was the first time the Papacy had attempted such a major intervention in EU affairs. The trail he blazed has been followed by many others. A month later two retiring EU Commissioners, Franz Fischler, an Austrian Christian Democrat, and Frits Bolkestein, a Dutch Liberal, declared themselves opposed to Turkish membership.

"Turkey should not be admitted to the EU, because it is not a European country. Christianity, feudalism, the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, democracy, and industrialization have made us what we Europeans are, but they have not made Turks who they are," Bolkestein wrote in an article explaining his views. The former Commissioner cited the success of 2,127 applications in 2003 by Turks seeking asylum in Europe (overlooking the possibility that economic motives may have been important in many cases) and the (ultimately unsuccessful) prosecution of the writer Orhan Pamuk in support.¹⁴

In other words, Cardinal Ratzinger's August 2004 remarks gave the starting signal for groundswell of anti-Turkish feeling in Europe, possibly fanned by a carefully organized media campaign. And a major success was achieved. In one of the EU's famous deadly compromises, the Luxembourg Summit approved the Turkish candidacy only on condition that it would not necessarily culminate in membership. The guarantee of eventual membership, no matter how difficult the adaptations required, had been the bedrock of all previous accession negotiations. Open-ended negotiations are intrinsically much tougher.

¹³ On some accounts, during his final illness Pope John Paul II attempted to dissociate himself from Cardinal Ratzinger's views on Turkey.

¹⁴ Frits Bolkestein, "What's wrong with Turkey?," *Daily Times Pakistan*, 16 December 2005.

In retrospect therefore, it looks very much as if Cardinal Ratzinger unlocked a sequence of events which may yet culminate in the permanent exclusion of Turkey from Europe and the frustration, or even reversal, of the westernizing course of Turkish history since 1839. Time will tell. But the Cardinal's words are remarkable seen from a strictly Catholic point of view. Catholicism claims to be a universal religion based not on 'Europeanness' but on the principle of "Go ye and teach all nations." Ratzinger however seems to advocate that Europe should redefine itself as a cultural and political fortress. This message has alarming implications, both for his fellow Catholics outside Europe and for non-Christians and persons of other cultures now living as citizens inside the EU. And one is tempted to ask whether the embargo on 'non-Europeans' would apply to the founder of Christianity and his Middle Eastern village family and followers.

Some Turks responded to Cardinal Ratzinger's remarks with polite efforts at opening a dialogue with him. The head of one of Turkey's largest NGOs wrote formally to him via the Vatican Embassy in Ankara. No acknowledgement or reply was ever received.

Reactions inside Turkey

The most immediate consequence of the Pope's remarks seems to have been a rise in hostility towards the Catholic Church among fringe radical Muslim groups. On February 5, the Catholic priest, Fr Andrea Santoro, an Italian priest serving a tiny Catholic community in the eastern Black Sea port of Trabzon was shot dead after Mass in his church by a sixteen year old boy. As he committed the murder, the boy reportedly shouted "Allahu ekber" (God is Great.) On October 10, after a trial from which the press were excluded on the grounds that a minor was involved, he was convicted and given a jail sentence of 18 years three months, but there is a widespread feeling that too little is known about the background to the case and how the boy came to be motivated to act as he did. In Izmir and Samsun there were less serious incidents of harassment of Italian priests. Services in Catholic churches in Turkey currently take place under police protection.

Since becoming the Pope, Benedict XVI has not returned to the question of Turkish membership. However last July, just under two years since the Le Figaro interview, another senior Vatican figure, Cardinal Kasper, President of the Pope's Council for Promoting Christian Unity, told *Corriere della Sera* "It is not the right moment for Turkey to join the European Union ... Turkey must change many things and it is not just a question of laws but of mentality, and you can't change mentality in one day."¹⁵ To date, no remarks favorable to Turkey have been heard from the Vatican since the death of Pope John Paul II, and any comments on the country have alluded only to its pre-Turkish cultural heritage. By contrast on 19 May 2005, Benedict XVI told one of Turkey's near neighbors, Macedonia, that "Tragically, cultural differences have often been a source of misunderstanding between peoples and even the cause of senseless conflicts and wars. In fact dialogue between cultures is an indispensable building stone of the universal civilization of love for which every man and woman longs. I encourage you and your citizens therefore to affirm the fundamental values common to all cultures."¹⁶

¹⁵ See David Barchard, "Continental Drift," *The Tablet*, 15 July 2006.

¹⁶ Pope's Address to Ambassador of Macedonia: "*Europe Needs the Balkan Nations, and They Need Europe!*" ZENIT News Agency, Vatican City, 19 May 2005

Benedict XVI and the Turkey visit

In April 2005, Cardinal Ratzinger ascended the throne of St. Peter after one of the shortest papal elections in modern times. One of the new Pope's first projects was a visit to Turkey, not to investigate Turkey's European credentials, but to visit the Greek Orthodox patriarch in Istanbul as part of Rome's continuing efforts to close the thousand year old schism. This was a project which he had inherited from his predecessor. The Pope has apparently indicated in some audiences that he also believes that the patriarchate needs moral support against Turkey.¹⁷

Why then a papal state visit to Turkey rather than a low profile private one to the patriarchate? In its discussions with the Turkish authorities, the Vatican insisted that international protocol (and apparently Catholic canon law) mean that when a Pope visits a country, the occasion must be a state visit and he must be received by the head of state.

The fact that the Vatican insisted on a particular date in the year, November 28-29, St. Andrew's Day, the dedicatory feast of the Istanbul patriarchate, rather than agreeing a date with the host country as is usually the case with state visits, created further problems. The Turkish Government took the view that November 2005 was too soon and agreed on November 2006. This coincided with a NATO summit which the Prime Minister of Turkey automatically attends. Just a month before the visit was announced that Mr. Erdoğan would not be in Turkey when Benedict XVI arrived. Under the particular circumstances of this visit the Vatican was asking rather a lot by expecting the premier to cancel one of his major engagements in the year. Matters were not helped by remarks to *Corriere della Sera* by the president of the Catholic bishops in Turkey, Bishop Ruggero Franceschini that "Elections are on the horizon and perhaps both left-wing and right-wing extremists who oppose dialogue prevailed. The prime minister probably thought that by not meeting the pope he had one less problem during the electoral campaign." Mr Erdoğan, according to the bishop, felt that there was no "benefit for his public image" to demonstrating the secular nature of the country by meeting the pope.¹⁸

So the visit goes ahead. Under heavy security the Pope will arrive in Ankara on 28 November. The planners appointed by the Vatican for the visit have decided that the papal visit to the Turkish capital will be purely a diplomatic occasion. Benedict XVI will address a group of officials and diplomats, though even ambassadors' wives are not to be invited. Most remarkably as plans stand at the time of writing, unlike his predecessor in 1979, Benedict XVI will not meet the local Christian community in the Turkish capital -a matter on which local feeling runs high. Meanwhile not surprisingly large numbers of protestors are said to be preparing to demonstrate against the visit by a figure apparently so unfriendly to their country and its historic aspirations.

A conclusion

If there is a lesson to be extracted from these events it is not that dealings between Turkey and the Vatican represent a "a clash of civilizations". Rather they demonstrate the limitations of bureaucracies and that the Vatican is trying to re-enter the European political stage in a way not seen since 1870. The Vatican's lingering pretensions to temporal, as opposed to spiritual,

¹⁷ Patsy McGarry in Rome; "Pontiff may make visit to Turkey," *Irish Times*; 8 July 2005.

¹⁸ *Corriere della Sera*, Monday 30 October 2006; ADN Kronos International, 2 November 2006.

authority have ensnared it in international complications which more capable and democratically-minded diplomats and administrators would easily have foreseen. In Ankara there seems to be a general wish for diplomatic relations with the Vatican to continue. But many western observers, and in particular Catholics, will surely ask themselves whether it would not be better for the Vatican diplomatic service to fold its tents in countries like Turkey where it has few interests and operate on a purely spiritual basis.

Equally, sooner or later, Turkey will have to take non-Muslim religions in the country out of the unique vacuum in which they currently operate. In modern societies religious organizations, like any other corporate bodies, are entitled to a clear footing in law which guarantees an absolute freedom to operate and also safeguards their rights to buildings which have, in some cases, been theirs for centuries