

Christian leaders credit pope for bringing them together

NEW YORK - Christian leaders who gathered April 18 for an ecumenical prayer service with Pope Benedict XVI at St. Joseph's Church in New York gave credit to the pope for joining 300 of them under one roof.

"No one but the pope is going to bring together a group as diverse as this," said the Rev. Mark Arey, director of Inter-Orthodox and Ecumenical Relations for the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America. "His mission is to bring people together. But this event allowed us not to just hear His Holiness, but, in the hour and a half before he arrived, to meet and greet one another.

"A group of leaders of such diverse religious groups would not normally get together," he said. "The pope has the force of personality and office to bring people together."

Rev. Arey said there were many Orthodox Christians at the event because "the Orthodox felt it was very important to be here to show that we take ecumenical dialogue very seriously - and to show respect for the ancient."

He added that the first papal visit to the United States since the Sept. 11, 2001, terror attacks against the nation "shows that diversity is not a threat."

The Rev. William J. Shaw, president of the National Baptist Convention USA, met Pope Benedict at an audience at the Vatican last year. He said the pope's remarks April 18 "represent an effort not just to experience friendship, but to put it in strong moral terms. The impact of the church's moral standing shines light on decisions made by individuals, institutions and nations."

He said there is a "strong and developing ecumenical spirit within the country lately" that welcomes Pentecostals, evangelicals and other groups not traditionally related to the ecumenical discussion. He attributed this to the more traditional groups "reaching out and welcoming them."

Bishop Don Dixon Williams, ecumenical officer of the United Way of the Cross Church of Christ, a Pentecostal denomination based in Danville, Va., said he was surprised to recognize so many of the other invitees. And, with security concerns requiring the ecumenical guests to be present two hours before the prayer service, there was time to chat.

“The atmosphere was really, really light, cordial,” Bishop Williams told Catholic News Service in an April 19 telephone interview from New York. “The spirit of unity, I guess, was the theme of the whole thing,” he added. “That was just a great thing, just being there with other people from other denominations.”

A member of Christian Churches Together in the USA’s steering committee, Bishop Williams noted how Pope Benedict acknowledged the group’s work. “So I felt a special connection, that he would lift up an organization I’m working for.”

For Bishop Williams personally “it was a validation of the 20 years of work that I’ve been trying to do. It was encouraging – and to be in a position to be exposed to somebody of his authority and status in the world. As a young boy, a kid, I never would have thought,” he said, chuckling, “that I would have been sitting in a church with the pope – (as) a little black boy from the projects.”

The Rev. Bernice A. King, an elder at New Birth Missionary Baptist Church in Lithonia, Ga., said she thanked Pope Benedict “for his clarion call for unity of the body of Christ and told him I was committed to doing my part around the world, especially with young people.”

Rev. King, the youngest daughter of Coretta Scott King and the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., said her encounter with Pope Benedict at St. Joseph’s Church “was one of those moments for me. My parents had the opportunity to meet Popes Pius XII and Paul VI. It was continuing a tradition for me.”

She said that every time her assistant tried to take a picture of the pope during the service she could only see an aura of illumination. Rev. King said that was a reminder to her of the importance of being in the moment – and not just taking a photo of the moment.

Contributing to this story was Mark Pattison in Washington.