

Diplomats welcome Pope Benedict's visit to United Nations

NEW YORK – Ambassador Maria Luiza Ribeiro Viotti, Brazil's representative to the United Nations, said the pope's April 18 U.N. visit will confirm the resolve of delegations to fulfill the world body's purposes, "including peace among nations, the respect for human rights and development for all."

She was exuberant in her praise of the pope's presence at the United Nations.

"It is the appropriate venue for a message that all peoples will hear with great interest and benefit," she said.

Early in the morning April 18, diplomats streamed into the United Nations to attend the pope's speech in the General Assembly hall later that morning. His U.N. speech was to be followed by greetings to the staff and personnel. He also was scheduled to meet with a smaller group of diplomats.

The pope arrived in New York from Washington shortly after 9:30 a.m.

By visiting the United Nations, Pope Benedict is continuing a papal tradition: Pope John Paul II visited the United Nations twice, in 1979 and 1995, and Pope Paul VI did so in 1965.

Several U.N. ambassadors spoke to Catholic News Service in anticipation of the papal visit.

Archbishop Celestino Migliore, the Vatican's U.N. nuncio, who was hosting the pope at his residence, said Pope Benedict "is regarded ... (by the international diplomatic community) first of all for his contribution to keep alive, nurture and refresh the dimension of spirituality and transcendence, without which our society would fall apart."

He said the United Nations and the Vatican, "though diverse in nature and aims, have many things in common."

He also said the church's "strong message of universal brotherhood, reconciliation and closeness to people makes her a sought-after place for dialogue and cooperation for development."

The pope and the U.N. secretary-general "are two eminent moral authorities in the world," Archbishop Migliore said, noting that the U.N. secretary-general "is oftentimes referred to as the 'secular pope.'" The current U.N. secretary-general is Ban Ki-moon of South Korea.

"In the context of the cultural fragmentation and of a certain political drift which render the world situation rather unstable and tense, the meeting between the two is of particular importance," Archbishop Migliore said.

France's U.N. ambassador, Jean-Maurice Ripert, said the pope's "involvement in the U.N. debate will ... send a clear and strong message of peace particularly on the main issues of international peace and security."

The pontiff has called "several times for dialogue and tolerance," Mr. Ripert said. He hopes the pope's U.N. visit will help to send a "signal to the international community" about the need for it to fulfill its responsibilities.

Ambassador Ulf Hjertonsen, who is consul general of Sweden's Permanent Mission to the United Nations, said his country also welcomed the pope's U.N. address.

"The Holy See is an international actor of rank and has an important role to play in addressing a number of major international challenges," he said. One of those challenges, he added, is "religious tolerance and interfaith dialogue, where the pope has taken important initiatives lately."

Ambassador Hilario G. Davide Jr. of the Philippines, who is a Catholic and a Knight of Columbus, called the pope's visit "heaven-sent," and said the pope embodies "the message of faith, hope and love, and invigorates the virtues of truth, justice and peace."

"That message and (those) virtues are what the world and all peoples desperately need today as they face terrorism, violence, hate and poverty that continue to enlarge a culture of death," he said.

The pope's words speak to a world that also must deal with "the challenges of climate change caused by the cruelty of man, which would burden the generations yet to come with an inheritance of a parched earth incapable of sustaining life," Davide said.

Ambassador Thomas Matussek of Germany said the diplomatic community had "high expectations" for the pope's visit.

He said it was fitting that the head of the Catholic Church was presenting "his message of peace at the seat of the United Nations, an organization that was after all founded to secure peace, protect human rights and advance development for all of humankind - topics that are central to Pope Benedict's message."

"His voice is decisive and we are looking forward to hearing it at the United Nations," he said.

Ambassador Jorge Arguello of Argentina said the papal visit "underscores the call of the United Nations for tolerance and dialogue in the framework of diversity."

Each member nation was allotted only six tickets to attend the papal speech and the tickets were snatched up immediately, according to a U.N. source. All other available seats were reserved for journalists and photographers, not all of whom were assured even standing space.