

# For pope, to know Gospel means to know Christ personally

VATICAN CITY – In a year-end meeting with the Roman Curia, Pope Benedict XVI looked back on 2007 and identified a crucial theme: the need to evangelize.

Rather than simply hitting the highlights of his ministry over the previous 12 months, the pope answered objections from those who see the church's missionary task as too marginal to today's problems or too problematic for interreligious dialogue.

The pope's speech Dec. 21 focused in large part on his trip last May to Brazil, where he inaugurated a major meeting of Latin American bishops.

The theme of that encounter was "Disciples and Missionaries of Jesus Christ." The pope said some might object that the topic was too inward-looking in a world full of urgent injustices that need righting.

In response, he emphasized a point that has become a touchstone of his pontificate: the Gospel cannot be implemented without a personal encounter with Christ.

Becoming a "disciple," he said, means getting to know Christ – through Scripture, participation in prayer and the sacraments, and learning about the witness of saints.

"One can never know Christ only theoretically," he said.

That, in fact, was a key point in Pope Benedict's best-selling book, "Jesus of Nazareth," published last spring. The book had to figure on the pope's "best of 2007" list, but – perhaps out of modesty – he didn't mention it in his speech to the Roman Curia.

The pope then looked at a related question: "Is it still acceptable to evangelize today?"

The argument, he said, is usually framed this way: "Shouldn't instead all the religions and world views live together peacefully and try to work together for the

good of humanity, each in their own way?”

In answering this argument, the pope first stressed that the church is committed to good relations with other religions. He noted with satisfaction that dialogue with Muslims seems back on track, after 138 Muslim scholars wrote to him this fall proposing an exchange of ideas based on shared values.

“I responded with joy, expressing my strong support of these noble ideas and underlining the urgency of a common commitment to the safeguarding of the values of mutual respect, of dialogue and of cooperation,” he said.

But dialogue does not erase the need to spread the Gospel, the pope said. The church exists to propose to all of humanity the message of Jesus Christ and the hope that flows from it, he said.

“Whoever has recognized a great truth, who has found a great joy, should transmit it. He cannot in fact keep it to himself. Gifts so large are never destined for just one person,” he said.

The pope cited St. Paul to explain that the church is driven to evangelize not so much out of concern for the salvation of unbaptized individuals, but out of the belief that history itself is incomplete until all populations are reached by the Gospel.

“To reach fulfillment, history needs the announcing of the good news to all peoples, to all men,” the pope said.

The pope’s words to the Curia lent significance to the last document to come out of the Vatican in 2007, a note from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith on the right and duty of Catholics to share their faith with others.

In a way, the papal speech also looked ahead to mid-2008, when the pope will inaugurate a special jubilee year dedicated to St. Paul, known as the early church’s foremost evangelizer.

The pope mentioned other moments of his trip to Brazil, including a gathering in a Sao Paulo soccer stadium with 40,000 young people. The encounter, animated by music and dance, was the kind of event some might consider too theatrical for the

German pontiff.

On the contrary, the pope said, it was a moment of deeply shared faith.

“There exist mass encounters that have the sole effect of self-affirmation, in which people are swept away by the intoxication of the rhythm and the sounds, and end up drawing joy only from themselves,” he said.

But at the youth encounter participants experienced an “opening of souls” and profound communion, he said.

The pope also recalled his meeting with recovering drug addicts at the church-run Farm of Hope center deep in Brazil’s central hills. He said that as soon as he arrived he was impressed with the beauty of the countryside.

“I noticed in a new way the healing strength of God’s creation,” he said. “Green mountains surround the wide valley. They lead one’s gaze upward and at the same time offer a sense of protection.”

When he entered the farm’s church, he found a clear-flowing spring inside.

“We need to defend creation not only because of our needs, but for itself – as a message of the creator and as a gift of beauty, which brings promise and hope,” he said.

In his reflection on the Brazilian landscape, the pope showed once again why the environment is an emerging theme of his pontificate. He seems convinced that the transcendent beauty of the natural world is one way for modern people to experience God.