

Four key phrases help unlock meaning of pope's speech at U.N.

UNITED NATIONS – Pope Benedict XVI gave the United Nations a dense and complex speech April 18. Here are four key phrases to help unlock its meaning:

- “Unchanging justice.” The pope used this phrase to describe the principle that fundamental human rights “cannot be applied piecemeal” and cannot be denied or diminished because of “different cultural, political, social and even religious outlooks.”

In one of the speech's most significant lines – one that could apply to the Middle East and several other global situations – he said that when human rights are unfairly applied it creates a breeding ground for violence:

“Indeed, the victims of hardship and despair, whose human dignity is violated with impunity, become easy prey to the call to violence, and they can then become violators of peace.”

- “The decisions of a few.” The pope never mentioned Iraq in his speech, but when he said the idea of multilateral consensus is “in crisis because it is still subordinated to the decisions of a few,” he seemed to take aim at the process that led to the Iraq War.

He reiterated to the General Assembly a point made to U.S. President George W. Bush at the White House: that diplomacy must be given every chance at “pre-empting” conflicts – an interesting word choice, considering U.S. arguments for pre-emptive war in Iraq five years ago.

When interventions are needed, the pope said, it must be in the form of “collective action by the international community.” Once again, his words demonstrated that multilateralism versus unilateralism remains an important Vatican talking point.

- “The order of creation.” The pope's talk had a green vein when he spoke of climate concerns and environmental protection. But rather than dwell on the technical side,

he placed the topic in a religious framework, saying that environmental efforts should “rediscover the authentic image of creation.”

Likewise, scientific and technological progress has brought great good but sometimes represents “a clear violation of the order of creation.” In this perspective, he invokes the “Creator,” part of his continuing effort to bring God into public discourse on ecological issues.

- “The public dimension of religion.” A strong final point in this speech was that religious liberty cannot be limited to freedom of worship, but must allow “the possibility of believers playing their part in building the social order.”

Believers should never have to suppress their faith in order to be active citizens, he said, or be forced to “deny God in order to enjoy one’s rights.”

The pope had in mind two situations: First, what he called the “secular ideology” of the West; second, “majority religious positions of an exclusive nature,” an apparent reference to countries of Muslim majority that impose strict Islamic law.