

In U.S., pope preaches message of hope built on faith

NEW YORK - From the White House to the U.N. General Assembly hall and from ground zero to the Washington Nationals' baseball stadium, Pope Benedict XVI preached a message of hope built on faith and a joint commitment to defending the dignity of the human person.

He acknowledged the "evil" of the clerical sexual abuse crisis, met privately with a group of victims and encouraged the U.S. bishops to continue their work to restore trust in the church and its ministers.

Celebrating Mass April 19 in New York's St. Patrick's Cathedral with thousands of priests and religious, the pope urged the Catholic Church in the United States to move past divisions and scandal toward a "new sense of unity and purpose."

It is time, he said, to "put aside all anger and contention" inside the church and embark on a fresh mission of evangelization in society.

Repeatedly during his April 15-20 stay in Washington and New York, he made it clear that he believed the "genuinely religious spirit" of the American people had not been extinguished and could be strengthened.

Tailoring his message to each group he met, Pope Benedict urged the people of the United States to resist the temptations and trends of modern society, maintaining their traditional values, defending human rights and reaching out with solidarity.

The Vatican billed the trip as a visit to the United Nations - particularly to help mark the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights - and as a

pastoral visit to the United States.

Pope Benedict spent three hours April 18 at the United Nations, addressing the General Assembly and U.N. staffers separately and holding private meetings with the organization's top officials.

He told the General Assembly that fundamental human rights "cannot be applied piecemeal" and cannot be denied or diminished because of "different cultural, political, social and even religious outlooks."

And, he said, when human rights are violated it creates a breeding ground for violence.

"Indeed," he said, "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."

Hours before he left April 20, Pope Benedict celebrated an afternoon Mass in New York's Yankee Stadium.

"In this land of religious liberty," he said, "Catholics found freedom not only to practice their faith, but also to participate fully in civic life, bringing their deepest moral convictions to the public square and cooperating with their neighbors in shaping a vibrant, democratic society."

He urged U.S. Catholics "to move forward with firm resolve to use wisely the blessings of freedom in order to build a future of hope for coming generations."

Meeting U.S. bishops in Washington April 16, the pope said secularism and materialism can influence the way people live out their faith, causing those who worship on Sundays to act contrary to church teaching the rest of the week.

Some people think they can pick and choose what they believe, he said.

“We’ve seen this emerge in an acute way in the scandal given by Catholics who promote an alleged right to abortion,” he said.

While Pope Benedict carefully avoided appearances of taking sides in a U.S. election year, in his April 16 speech at the White House, he said it was important to preserve the traditional role of religion in American political and social life.

Religious values helped forge “the soul of the nation” and should continue to inspire Americans as they face complex political and ethical issues today, he said.

“Democracy can only flourish, as your Founding Fathers realized, when political leaders and those whom they represent are guided by truth and bring the wisdom born of firm moral principle to decisions affecting the life and future of the nation,” Pope Benedict said before holding a private meeting with President George W. Bush.

The visit to the White House was the first official event on his calendar, and it coincided with his 81st birthday, when he heard dozens of versions of “Happy Birthday” sung in his honor.

Also during the trip, he celebrated the third anniversary of his April 19, 2005, election as pope.

That evening, at a boisterous rally with some 25,000 young people on the grounds of the New York archdiocesan seminary in Yonkers, Pope Benedict not only fueled the youths’ enthusiasm, he warned them of the dangers of thinking freedom could be divorced from responsibilities and from the truth about God and human beings.

Pope Benedict offered a personal reflection on his own youth in Germany, which he said was “marred by a sinister regime that thought it had all the answers.”

Nazism, he said, “banished God and thus became impervious to anything true and good.”

When freedom disregards absolute truth, relegating it instead to the private sphere of the individual, relativism takes hold, he said.

Truth is neither an imposition nor a simple set of rules, Pope Benedict said. “Ultimately truth is a person: Jesus Christ.”

The pope also spoke about the dangers of individualism April 18 in New York when he presided over an ecumenical prayer service. The pope said he was concerned that in a world marked by a greater sense of global unity and interdependence, the feeling of “fragmentation and a retreat into individualism” is seen in Christian denominations just as it is in the world at large.

The Christian faith is not a matter of picking and choosing what to believe and what to discard from the Scriptures and Christian tradition, he said.

Walking away from tradition has split denominations and makes it increasingly difficult for Christians to give a united witness to a world in search of meaning, the pope said.

Celebrating Mass April 17 at brand-new Nationals Park in Washington, the pope urged U.S. Catholics to renew their missionary energy at a time when American society is at a moral crossroads.

The pope warned of “signs of a disturbing breakdown in the very foundations of society” and said people need the church’s message of hope and fidelity to the demands of the Gospel.

“The world needs this witness. Who can deny that the present moment is a crossroads, not only for the church in America but also for society as a whole?” he

said.

Meeting Catholic educators that evening, he said the Catholic identity of a school or university cannot be equated simply with the orthodoxy of course content, but is broader and means ensuring “that each and every aspect of your learning communities reverberates within the ecclesial life of faith.”

A primary role of the church and, therefore, of church educational institutions is “upholding the essential moral categories of right and wrong.”

Without that moral guidance, he said, “hope could only wither, giving way to cold pragmatic calculations of utility that render the person little more than a pawn on some ideological chess board.”

The need to uphold traditional moral values and to stress the fact that truth is not determined by individual preference or majority vote was not a message reserved to U.S. Catholics.

Meeting about 200 representatives of Islam, Jainism, Buddhism, Hinduism and Judaism in Washington April 17, he encouraged all people of faith “to persevere in their collaboration” to serve society and enrich public life.

The pope said it was not enough for religious leaders to get together to find ways to ensure their people get along with each other.

“The broader purpose of dialogue is to discover the truth,” he said.

“By bearing witness to those moral truths which they hold in common with all men and women of good will, religious groups will exert a positive influence on the wider culture and inspire neighbors, co-workers and fellow citizens to join in the task of strengthening the ties of solidarity,” the pope said.

The pope met separately April 17 with the Jewish participants in the interreligious meeting to offer his best wishes for their upcoming celebration of Passover. And, the next afternoon he visited Park East Synagogue in New York.

There, the pope said he felt especially close to Jews on the eve of Passover as they “prepare to celebrate the great deeds of the Almighty and to sing the praises of him who has worked such wonders for his people.”

He was welcomed at the synagogue by Rabbi Arthur Schneier, 78, an Austrian-born Holocaust survivor, who called his historic visit “a reaffirmation of your outreach, good will and commitment to enhancing Jewish-Catholic relations.”

Contributing to this story were Carol Zimmermann and John Thavis in New York and Washington; Beth Griffin, Benedicta Cipolla and Angelo Stagnaro in New York; and Mark Pattison, Nancy O’Brien, Patricia Zapor, Julie Asher and Regina Linksey in Washington.