

Lack of religious freedom harms security, pope says in peace message

VATICAN CITY - Infringements on the freedom of religion threaten peace and security worldwide as well as stifle authentic human growth and development, Pope Benedict XVI said.

“Religious freedom is an authentic weapon of peace,” which fosters the human qualities and potentials that “can change the world and make it better,” the pope said in his message for World Peace Day, Jan. 1, 2011.

Pope Benedict’s message, which was delivered to world leaders by Vatican ambassadors, was released at the Vatican Dec. 16. The message was translated into Arabic as well as several European languages, including Russian.

The message, titled “Religious Freedom, the Path to Peace,” made special mention of the “theater of violence and strife” in Iraq and the deadly attack on a Syrian Catholic church in Baghdad Oct. 31.

The pope said it is in the context of widespread violence, persecution, intolerance and discrimination against people of faith that he decided to dedicate the peace day message to the fundamental importance of religious freedom as the basis for the well-being and growth of individuals and whole societies.

“At present, Christians are the religious group which suffers most from persecution on account of its faith,” citing specifically the Christian communities in Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and “especially in the Holy Land,” said the pope.

During a presentation of the message to the press, Monsignor Anthony Frontiero, an official at the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, said that of all the people “who are discriminated against, hurt, killed or persecuted for religious reasons, 75 percent worldwide are Christian.” The statistic came from a spokesperson from The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life during a conference hosted by the European

Parliament in November.

“A conservative estimate of the number of Christians killed for their faith each year is somewhere around 150,000,” Monsignor Frontiero said quoting an article published Dec. 4 by the online news site of the Toronto Star daily newspaper.

“Virtually every human rights group and Western government agency that monitors the plight of Christians worldwide arrives at more or less the same conclusion: Between 200 million and 230 million of them face daily threats of murder, beating, imprisonment and torture, and a further 350 to 400 million encounter discrimination in areas such as jobs and housing,” the monsignor quoted from the news article.

In his message, the pope said the fact that Christians must live in fear because of their faith “is unacceptable, since it represents an insult to God and to human dignity.”

“Furthermore, it is a threat to security and peace, and an obstacle to the achievement of authentic and integral human development,” he said.

The pope also warned against “more sophisticated forms of hostility to religion” which, in Western countries, is often expressed by a denial of its Christian roots and the rejection of religious symbols, “which reflect the identity and the culture of the majority of citizens.”

Such hostility is “inconsistent with a serene and balanced vision of pluralism and the secularity of institutions,” he said. Governmental and social institutions are called to engage in respectful dialogue with religious groups, which can make important contributions toward the common good, he added.

Civil society must acknowledge and make room for the right of believers to have their voice heard in the public realm, he said.

“To eclipse the public role of religion is to create a society which is unjust, inasmuch as it fails to take account of the true nature of the human person; it is to stifle the growth of the authentic and lasting peace of the whole human family,” Pope Benedict said.

The pope urged societies to strike a careful balance between the unjust extremes of religious fundamentalism on one hand and a secularist, total exclusion of God on the other.

While laws and institutions must support people's religious dimension, he said states must never exploit religious freedom in order to pursue "hidden interests, such as the subversion of the established order, the hoarding of resources, or the grip on power of a single group."

Because religion is not "a creation of the state, it cannot be manipulated by the state," rather, he said, the state has a duty to acknowledge and respect religion.

On the other extreme, in which societies may reject God and religious values from the public realm, he said those societies risk "falling under the sway of idols," relative interests, and pseudo-values which in turn make societies vulnerable to political and ideological totalitarianism.

Cardinal Peter Turkson, president of the justice and peace council, told reporters that "religious freedom is not considered a human right just because the Universal Declaration (of Human Rights) affirms it."

Religious freedom is not granted by a state but is derived from natural law and the dignity of the person who is made up of body and spirit, he said.

Pope Benedict urged world leaders to "act promptly to end every injustice" against Christians in Asia, Africa and the Middle East; he also assured all Christians facing violence and discrimination of his prayers and asked they renew their commitment to forgiveness and reconciliation.

The pope ended his message with a plea to Western countries to end their "hostility and prejudice against Christians" and he urged Europe to become reconciled with its Christian roots, which, he said, are indispensable for promoting justice, harmony and peace.

The pope noted that 2011 marks the 25th anniversary of the World Day of Prayer for Peace convened by Pope John Paul II in Assisi in 1986.

Cardinal Turkson said his council, the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and a group of Franciscans were making plans to commemorate the anniversary, and had yet to see if Pope Benedict would be able to participate.

The text of the pope's World Peace Day message in English will be posted online at: www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/messages/peace/documents/hf_ben-xvi_mes_20101208_xliv-world-day-peace_en.html.

The text of the pope's message in Spanish will be posted online at: www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/messages/peace/documents/hf_ben-xvi_mes_20101208_xliv-world-day-peace_sp.html.