

# Latin American, Caribbean bishops tackle agenda outlined by pope

APARECIDA, Brazil – With their agenda broadly outlined by Pope Benedict XVI, the bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean began the conference that will lead to pastoral guidelines for the region for the next 10-15 years.

Several bishops who spoke with journalists said the pope raised many of the issues likely to be addressed during the conference, including deeper formation in the faith and church social doctrine, poverty, ministry among indigenous peoples and family life.

Archbishop Pedro Barreto Jimeno of Huancayo, Peru, called the pope's May 13 speech to the bishops "inspiring" and "encouraging." Archbishop Baltazar Porras Cardozo of Merida, Venezuela, told journalists that the pope did not "put us in a straitjacket" but "came to present a challenge to the church."

The pope's address officially opened the Fifth General Conference of the Bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean, which runs through May 31.

On May 14, after Mass in the Basilica of the National Shrine of Our Lady Aparecida, the 266 bishops and observers attending the meeting spent the morning in a retreat. The afternoon session included speeches by Cardinal Giovanni Battista Re, president of the Pontifical Commission for Latin America, and Archbishop Geraldo Lyrio Rocha of Mariana, president of the Brazilian bishops' conference.

Many of the points raised by the pope have to do with values that "go beyond the bounds of the church and touch society as a whole," said Bishop Antonio Queiroz of Catanduva, Brazil.

Pope Benedict told the bishops that the church should not take an active role in partisan politics, but should focus on forming laypeople to apply Christian values in social and political life.

Conferences of bishops in various Latin American countries regularly issue statements on political and economic issues ranging from land rights to corporate

responsibility to policies for combating poverty. Several bishops said the pope's words did not mean that the church should not take a stand on political issues.

"We do participate in politics," said Bishop Hector Gutierrez Pabon of Engativa, Colombia. "When we are committed to the common good, we are involved in politics, but not partisan politics. It is politics that seeks the common good" through the Gospel and the church's social doctrine.

"The pope affirmed that the church must defend justice and the poor. It therefore must be independent of those who hold political and economic power," Archbishop Barreto told Catholic News Service. The church must avoid "any collaboration (with those powers) or complicity through silence," he said.

A reference by the pope to pre-Columbus religions raised questions among some observers. While speaking positively of the synthesis between indigenous traditions and Christianity that led to the popular religious devotions found throughout Latin America, the pontiff warned against "the utopia of going back to breathe life into the pre-Columbus religions, separating them from Christ and from the universal church."

Asked whether that represented a step back from the openness to indigenous traditions that has marked other gatherings of the region's church leaders, Archbishop Porras said, "It is not a retreat," but a recognition that "the coinciding of values in (Christianity's) encounter and dialogue with ancestral religions meant that these peoples assumed it in a rich way that is particularly expressed in Latin American popular religious practice."

That practice, however, does not necessarily translate into active parish life in Latin America.

While millions of Latin Americans make pilgrimages to well-known shrines, such as Aparecida, Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico and the Lord of the Miracles in Peru, as well as countless local places of devotion, "they do not participate in the weekly Eucharist" in their parishes, said Cardinal Javier Errazuriz Ossa of Santiago, Chile, president of the Latin American bishops' council, known by its Spanish acronym as CELAM.

The myriad devotions do not mean “that these people have developed a full sense of the deep Christian truth. They live out fundamental aspects of our faith, but the enormous richness of the Christian faith still has not borne fruit.”

How to enhance these Catholics’ faith formation and reach others who consider themselves Catholic but do not participate in church life is likely to be high on the bishops’ agenda in the coming weeks.

The pope’s reference to Latin American male chauvinism may also spark conversation among the bishops.

“The pope recognized that the church owes a certain debt to women,” Bishop Queiroz said, although he added that women’s ordination is “a closed issue.” The bishop called it a “sin of evangelization” that “women have worked more than men for the church, but it has been difficult to acknowledge the place that women truly merit.”

While the agenda for the bishops’ meeting was loosely set by the pope and by several thousand pages of suggestions that emerged from discussions in dioceses throughout the region, as well as among Hispanics in 50 dioceses in the United States, the specific issues to be discussed and the work methodology were to be determined in the first few days of the meeting in Aparecida.

One issue that the bishops are likely to raise, although it did not figure prominently in the pope’s May 13 speech, is “the destruction of the environment,” Archbishop Barreto said.

Another is education. At the youth rally on the second day of the pope’s visit, a young woman called for the church to do more to help poor students and those who could not attend school because they lack funds or have to work to help support their families.

Archbishop Barreto said the quality of education in the region deserves attention from church leaders.

“Governments are investing less and less in education and the quality is decreasing,” he said. “A country that has inadequate education cannot develop harmoniously.”