

Pope achieved objectives critical to future of U.S. church

NEW YORK – On his first trip to the United States, Pope Benedict XVI achieved three objectives that could be considered critical to the pastoral future of the American church.

First, the pope brought a certain closure to the priestly sex abuse scandal that has shaken the church for more than six years, expressing his personal shame at what happened and praying with the victims.

Second, he set forth a moral challenge to the wider U.S. culture on issues ranging from economic justice to abortion, but without coming across as doctrinaire or bullying.

Third, to a church that often seems divided into conservative and liberal camps, he issued a firm appeal to “set aside all anger” and unite in order to effectively evangelize society.

In the process of his April 15-20 visit, the 81-year-old pope established his own identity in a country that did not know him well and in a sense came out of the shadow of the late Pope John Paul II.

“I feel like I know him a lot better. I learned that he is trying all his best to reach out to the youth,” 18-year-old Gabriella Fiorentino of Yonkers, N.Y., said at a youth rally April 19.

Did she understand what the pope, a scholarly theologian, was trying to get across?

“Jesus’ message of hope – that is his message,” she said.

The pope addressed clerical sex abuse on five different occasions, beginning with his encounter with reporters aboard his plane from Rome. He spoke from the heart about the shame, the damage to the church and the suffering of the victims.

He also spoke with familiarity about the church’s efforts to make sure perpetrators

are out of ministry and to implement better screening of would-be priests.

At one point, he mentioned that when he read the case histories of the victims, he found it hard to imagine how a priest could betray his mission to be an agent of God's love.

These were far more detailed and direct comments on the issue than were ever made by Pope John Paul, and there was a reason: As Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, Pope Benedict headed the doctrinal congregation, which took over the handling of sex abuse cases in 2001.

What Cardinal Ratzinger saw in those files led him to denounce, in early 2005, the "filth" inside the church - even among its own priests.

The pope's unscheduled meeting with five sex abuse victims was a moving and tearful encounter. It seemed to mark an emotional turning point for several of those who participated and perhaps indirectly to others among the thousands of victims in the United States.

Overall, the pope left the strong impression among Americans that, on the sex abuse issue, he "gets it."

The pope's broader issue in the United States was what he called the "attack of a new secularism" that threatens to undermine traditional moral values and the voice of religion in public affairs.

He articulated this challenge on several occasions, most notably telling 45,000 people at a Washington Mass that American society is at a moral crossroads.

"We see clear signs of a disturbing breakdown in the very foundations of society: signs of alienation, anger and polarization on the part of many of our contemporaries; increased violence; a weakening of the moral sense; a coarsening of social relations; and a growing forgetfulness of God," he said.

To counter these trends, he said, people need the church's message of hope and fidelity to the demands of the Gospel.

What was striking about the pope's approach was that it was framed in a very positive context. Over and over, he praised the United States for blending a secular form of government with a moral order based on "the dominion of God the Creator."

He quoted George Washington, who called religion and morality the "indispensable supports" of political prosperity, and cited Franklin Roosevelt's statement that "no greater thing could come to our land today than a revival of the spirit of faith."

The pope warned, however, that today this secular-moral balance risks tipping toward a godless, individualist form of freedom. He made his argument more relevant by linking it to a popular contemporary issue: environmental degradation.

"The earth itself groans under the weight of consumerist greed and irresponsible exploitation," he told young people. In the pope's view, ecology is part of an ethic of respect for creation and the creator.

When it came to the church and its sometimes divided membership, the pope had an equally encouraging approach. Time and again, he praised the vitality of parish life and movements and noted U.S. Catholics' continuing contribution to the life of the country.

He said he was convinced that God was preparing a "new springtime" for the church in the United States.

The pope looked honestly at shortcomings, too, lamenting that some Catholics are not in line with church teaching, even on the issue of abortion. But his solution, expressed to bishops, was a long-term program of religious education, not a set of short-term marching orders or penalties.

In a comment aimed at people inside and outside the church, he said the faith is more than a set of rules and suggested that more attention should be given to external challenges.

"Perhaps we have lost sight of this: In a society where the church seems legalistic and 'institutional' to many people, our most urgent challenge is to communicate the joy born of faith and the experience of God's love," he said.

One of his strongest themes was church unity. At a Mass in St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York, he expressed disappointment with the formation of divisions within the church between Catholic groups, generations and individuals.

The church, he said, needs to "put aside all anger and contention" and turn its gaze together toward Christ.

At a Mass in Yankee Stadium on his last day in New York, he told Catholics to remember that all church groups, associations and programs exist only to support and foster deeper unity in Christ.

The papal Masses highlighted the diversity of the church in the United States which, as the pope said, comes together in a "common commitment to the spread of the Gospel." These were colorful, musical liturgies and the pope seemed pleased with them.

The papal visit did not register very high on topical issues. He avoided partisan political questions, did not mention Iraq and, although he visited ground zero, certainly did not dwell on terrorism.

His United Nations address was not a state-of-the-world survey but a call to conscience on the moral foundations of human rights.

The pope's focus was religion and its place in all areas of life.

Before the papal visit, most Americans said they didn't know a lot about Pope Benedict. When he left the country, they were more likely to view him as he described himself upon his arrival: as "a friend, a preacher of the Gospel and one with great respect for this vast pluralistic society."