

Pope asks for help in saving threatened cathedral

VATICAN CITY - Pope Benedict XVI asked Romania's new ambassador to the Vatican for his help in stopping construction of a skyscraper next to Bucharest's St. Joseph Cathedral.

Welcoming Marius Gabriel Lazurca to the Vatican Jan. 20, the pope said smooth relations between the government and church communities present in the country would contribute to "social peace."

"In this regard, I can only express my concern over the matter of the Cathedral of St. Joseph in Bucharest," the pope told the ambassador.

In a Dec. 4 statement, the Vatican said the physical stability of the cathedral, built in the late 1800s, is threatened by work on the 18-story office building just 30 feet away from the northeast wall of the church.

The pope, speaking Jan. 20, asked the ambassador's assistance in preserving the building and the values it represents for the Catholic community and for all Romanians.

He also expressed his appreciation for the progress made by the government in dealing with the "delicate question" of the restitution of church property confiscated by Romania's former communist government and put to other uses.

Justice requires that the process continue, he said, especially so that the Christian communities that suffered so much under communism, especially the Eastern-rite Catholic communities, would be able to take their rightful place in Romanian society.

Pope Benedict also used his speech as an occasion to congratulate Romania on its Jan. 1 entry into the European Union "after long years of effort."

He expressed his hope that EU membership would allow all Romanians "to enjoy the basic freedoms and to benefit from economic and social progress."

The pope's remarks came at a time when human rights groups were expressing concern over Romania's new norms for the registration of religious communities.

Under the new law, signed Dec. 27 by President Traian Basescu, religious groups seeking legal status will need to have congregations representing at least 0.1 percent of Romania's population, or about 23,000 members.

With backing from Baptist and evangelical leaders, Romania's Solidarity for Freedom of Conscience organization said Jan. 12 it would challenge the new law before the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg, France.

Human rights organizations have said that the new law punishes any religious group that is congregational or independent rather than being part of a hierarchical structure, such as a diocese, or at least affiliated with other communities on a national level.

Contributing to this story was Jonathan Luxmoore in Poland.