

Pope, at U.N., says no government or religion can limit human rights

UNITED NATIONS – Neither government nor religion has a right to change or limit human rights, because those rights flow from the dignity of each person created in God's image, Pope Benedict XVI said.

In his April 18 speech to the U.N. General Assembly, the pope insisted that human rights cannot be limited or rewritten on the basis of national interests or majority rule.

But he also said the role of religions is not to dictate government policy, but to help their members strive to find the truth, including the truth about the dignity of all people even if their religious views are different.

U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon welcomed the pope and met privately with him before the pope addressed the General Assembly.

In his public welcoming remarks, the U.N. leader said, "The United Nations is a secular institution, composed of 192 states. We have six official languages but no official religion. We do not have a chapel – though we do have a meditation room.

"But if you ask those of us who work for the United Nations what motivates us, many of us reply in a language of faith," he said. "We see what we do not only as a job, but as a mission. Indeed, mission is the word we use most often for our work around the world – from peace and security to development to human rights.

"Your Holiness, in so many ways, our mission unites us with yours," he said.

The pope acknowledged that common ground not only in his speech, but also in a brief homage to U.N. staff members and peacekeepers who have lost their lives in the line of duty.

Before leaving U.N. headquarters, he stopped before the war-scarred U.N. flag that had flown outside the U.N. headquarters in Baghdad, Iraq, in 2003.

Placed above the words “Fallen in the cause of peace,” the flag has become a memorial, particularly to Sergio Vieira de Mello, the U.N. envoy to Iraq who was killed in Baghdad in August 2003.

Before addressing the General Assembly, the pope signed a visitor’s book, writing in Latin: “Erit opus iustitiae pax (Is 32:17) 18.IV.2008 Benedictus XVI.” The Latin quote from the Book of Isaiah is translated in the New American Bible as “Justice will bring about peace.”

In his address to the General Assembly, the German-born Pope Benedict said he came to the United Nations as a sign of his esteem for the organization, founded after the devastation of World War II when several governments ignored the fact that human beings were created by God and that the basic principles of right and wrong are written in the heart of each person.

“In consequence,” he said, “freedom and human dignity were grossly violated.”

The pope, always a strong supporter of the United Nations and its efforts to avoid conflicts and end wars, insisted that when one country has a problem with another, it must not act unilaterally, but seek the assistance of the United Nations.

“This is all the more necessary at a time when we experience the obvious paradox of a multilateral consensus that continues to be in crisis because it is still subordinated to the decisions of a few, whereas the world’s problems call for interventions in the form of collective action by the international community,” he said.

As expected, Pope Benedict paid tribute to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted 60 years ago.

The pope said the document – proclaiming the equality of all people, the basic right to life and to freedom, liberty of conscience and the free practice of religion – was the result of “a convergence of different religious and cultural traditions.”

The traditions, he said, were determined to ensure that concern for and protection of the human person was the center of attention in the workings of societies, governments and institutions.

“The rights recognized and expounded in the declaration apply to everyone by virtue of the common origin of the person, who remains the high point of God’s creative design for the world and for history,” the pope said.

“They are based on the natural law inscribed on human hearts and present in different cultures and civilizations,” he said.

Pope Benedict said an attempt to deny that human rights have a foundation in the way God created human beings and that they are common to all people creates a real risk that they will be limited “in the name of different cultural, political, social and even religious outlooks.”

The pope said it is essential that people and governments recognize they are not the creators of human rights and they cannot limit them.

Religious freedom is an essential human right, he said, and when exercised as a search for truth, religion can promote a broader recognition of human rights.

“A vision of life firmly anchored in the religious dimension can help to achieve this since recognition of the transcendent value of every man and woman favors conversion of heart, which then leads to a commitment to resist violence, terrorism and war and to promote justice and peace,” the pope said.

Pope Benedict said interreligious dialogue contributes to global peace and the defense of human rights when it brings believers together in their search for truth.

The task of religions, he said, “is to propose a vision of faith not in terms of intolerance, discrimination and conflict, but in terms of complete respect for truth, coexistence, rights and reconciliation.”

While religions have an obligation to promote recognition of human rights, they also must defend the rights of their members to bring the values of their faith to bear on the decisions they make as citizens.

“It is inconceivable, then, that believers should have to suppress a part of themselves – their faith – in order to be active citizens,” he said. “It should never be necessary to deny God in order to enjoy one’s rights.”

The pope asked the United Nations and the world's governments to make special efforts to defend religious freedom in societies where extreme secularism tends to push believers out of the public sphere and where one religion has been adopted as the national religion and other believers suffer discrimination or oppression.

The pope also told the United Nations that upholding all human rights for all residents of a country is a measure of that country's progress in working for the common good.

In addition, he said, "the promotion of human rights remains the most effective strategy for eliminating inequalities between countries and social groups and for increasing security."

When dignity is attacked and when people live in hardship and despair, he said, they become "easy prey to the call to violence."

After speaking to the General Assembly, the pope met privately with its president and the president of the Security Council. Then he returned to the General Assembly hall, where he addressed members of the U.N. staff.