

# Pope avoids politicking, urges strong moral focus in public policy

WASHINGTON - Although some had predicted that Pope Benedict XVI's April 15-20 visit to the United States would take a decidedly political turn in a presidential election year, the pope's major speeches avoided specific references to most domestic and international issues while defending the right of church leaders to speak out on public policy matters.

In his homily at Yankee Stadium April 20 before his departure for Rome, Pope Benedict said working for the kingdom of God "means rejecting a false dichotomy between faith and political life, since, as the Second Vatican Council put it, 'there is no human activity - even in secular affairs - which can be withdrawn from God's dominion.'"

"It means working to enrich American society and culture with the beauty and truth of the Gospel and never losing sight of that great hope which gives meaning and value to all the other hopes which inspire our lives," he added.

At the most overtly political event of his trip, an April 16 meeting at the White House with President George W. Bush, the pope said it was important to preserve the traditional role of religion in American political and social life.

Religious values helped forge "the soul of the nation" and should continue to inspire Americans as they face complex political and ethical issues today, he said.

Speaking to the U.S. bishops gathered at The Catholic University of America in Washington later that day, Pope Benedict talked about the role of the bishops in addressing the issues of the day, especially during an election year when church leaders cannot assume that "all Catholic citizens think in harmony with the church's teaching on key ethical issues."

"It falls to you to ensure that the moral formation provided at every level of ecclesial life reflects the authentic teaching of the Gospel of life," Pope Benedict said, noting that currently in the U.S. and elsewhere there is "proposed legislation that gives

cause for concern from the point of morality.”

Only one speech during the U.S. trip specifically mentioned the word “politics” - and that was in the context of Nazi influence in his native Germany.

“My own years as a teenager were marred by a sinister regime that thought it had all the answers; its influence grew - infiltrating schools and civic bodies, as well as politics and even religion - before it was fully recognized for the monster it was,” Pope Benedict said at an April 19 rally with seminarians and young people at St. Joseph’s Seminary in Yonkers, N.Y.

At the White House, the pope said preserving freedom calls for virtue, self-discipline, a sense of sacrifice for the common good and responsibility for the less fortunate, he said.

“It also demands the courage to engage in civic life and to bring one’s deepest beliefs and values to reasoned public debate,” he said.

A joint U.S.-Vatican statement issued after Bush and Pope Benedict met privately for about 20 minutes said the two leaders had discussed a long list of moral and religious considerations to which both parties are committed, including the respect and dignity of the human person; the defense and promotion of life, matrimony and the family; the education of future generations; human rights and religious freedom; sustainable development and the struggle against poverty and pandemics, especially in Africa.

In his talk to the bishops, the pope said that “as preachers of the Gospel and leaders of the Catholic community,” they were “called to participate in the exchange of ideas in the public square, helping to shape cultural attitudes.”

“In a context where free speech is valued, and where vigorous and honest debate is encouraged, yours is a respected voice that has much to offer to the discussion of the pressing social and moral questions of the day,” he added.

Responding to a question about the increasing secularism in U.S. public life, Pope Benedict said he found it significant that “here in America, unlike many places in Europe, the secular mentality has not been intrinsically opposed to religion.”

But “America’s brand of secularism poses a particular problem,” he added. “It allows for professing belief in God and respects the public role of religion and churches, but at the same time it can subtly reduce religious beliefs to a lowest common denominator. Faith becomes a passive acceptance that certain things ‘out there’ are true, but without practical relevance for everyday life.”

When this attitude is “aggravated by an individualistic and eclectic approach to faith and religion ... Christians are easily tempted to conform themselves to the spirit of this age,” Pope Benedict told the bishops. “We have seen this emerge in an acute way in the scandal given by Catholics who promote an alleged right to abortion.”