

Pope, Bush discuss fighting terrorism while respecting human rights

WASHINGTON - In a meeting at the White House, Pope Benedict XVI and President George W. Bush discussed the problem of terrorism and how to confront it while respecting human rights.

The two leaders also expressed their joint concern for the protection of human life, marriage and the family, according to a statement issued after a private meeting April 16.

"The two reaffirmed their total rejection of terrorism as well as the manipulation of religion to justify immoral and violent acts against innocents," the statement said.

"They further touched on the need to confront terrorism with appropriate means that respect the human person and his or her rights," it said.

The encounter was the pope's first official event of his April 15-20 visit to the United States, and it began with a public welcoming ceremony on the South Lawn of the White House, attended by thousands of well-wishers.

In a speech, 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.

The pope was celebrating his 81st birthday, and he smiled and beamed as the crowd sang an impromptu "Happy Birthday." The two leaders stood and listened to their respective national anthems, then a fife and drum corps played a medley of "Yankee Doodle" and other patriotic songs.

Bush greeted the pope with the Latin phrase "Pax tecum" ("Peace be with you"), and

said the entire country was moved and honored to have the pope spend “this special day” with them.

The pope, speaking in English, said he had come to the United States “as a friend, a preacher of the Gospel and one with great respect for this vast pluralistic society.”

He said that from the beginning the United States’ history and its quest for freedom was linked to “a moral order based on the dominion of God the creator.” This was seen in the proclamation of “the self-evident truth that all men are created equal and endowed with inalienable rights,” he said.

Religious values have continued to be a driving force, for example in the struggle against slavery and the human rights movement, he said.

“In our time, too, particularly in moments of crisis, Americans continue to find their strength in a commitment to this patrimony of shared ideals and aspirations,” he said.

The pope then spoke about freedom in the U.S. tradition, saying Americans have always understood freedom as not just a gift but as a summons to responsibility.

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.

Freedom has a deep connection to truth, the pope said. Quoting Pope John Paul II, he said the late pope had “reminded us that history shows, time and again, that ‘in a world without truth, freedom loses its foundation,’ and a democracy without values can lose its very soul.”

The pope said the church is convinced that faith can shed new light and inspire people to work for a more just and fraternal society.

“Democracy can only flourish, as your Founding Fathers realized, when political leaders and those whom they represent are guided by truth and bring the wisdom

born of firm moral principle to decisions affecting the life and future of the nation," he said.

The pope did not speak about specific domestic or international issues in his public remarks. But he ended his talk with a call for global solidarity and said commitment to the "patient efforts of international diplomacy to resolve conflicts" was key to building a world where truth, freedom and justice can flourish.

In his speech, Bush picked up on several of the pope's favorite themes, denouncing a "dictatorship of relativism" that threatens traditional values.

The pope did not mention terrorism, but the president referred to it, saying: "In a world where some evoke the name of God to justify acts of terror and murder and hate, we need your message that God is love."

The president drew applause when he said: "In a world where some treat life as something to be debased and discarded, we need your message that all human life is sacred and that each of us is willed and each of us is loved and each of us is necessary."

Bush said that during his visit the pope would find a nation of prayer and generous service to others, in which the measure of success is "how we treat the weakest and most vulnerable among us."

The United States, he said, is among the most religious countries on earth.

After the public ceremony, the two leaders walked into the Oval Office for private talks that lasted about 20 minutes.

A joint U.S.-Vatican statement issued after the meeting 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.

The pope welcomed the substantial U.S. financial contributions toward fighting

poverty and disease, the statement said.

It said the pope and president had devoted considerable time to the Middle East, in particular “resolving the Israel-Palestinian conflict in line with the vision of two states living side-by-side in peace and security.”

They also discussed a growing Vatican concern for the “precarious state” of the Christian community in Iraq, whose members have been targeted in attacks.

The two leaders expressed support for the sovereignty and independence of Lebanon and called for a “prompt and comprehensive solution to the crises which afflict the region.”

The statement said another issue on their private agenda was the need for a coordinated policy regarding immigration, especially the humane treatment of immigrants and the well being of their families.