

Pope, French president discuss wide range of topics

VATICAN CITY - Pope Benedict XVI welcomed French President Nicolas Sarkozy to the Vatican for talks focused on Europe, the Middle East, Africa and the role of religions in society.

At the beginning of a 25-minute private meeting, held without interpreters, Sarkozy asked the pope where he had learned his "impressive" French.

The German pope replied that he had studied French in high school in Bavaria.

A Vatican statement released after Sarkozy's meeting with the pope and a separate meeting with Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, Vatican secretary of state, said the discussions included the French situation, "evoking the good relations existing between the Catholic Church and the French republic, as well as the role of religions, especially of the Catholic Church, in the world."

"Particular attention was given to the international situation with reference to the future of Europe, the conflicts in the Middle East, the social and political problems of some African countries and the drama of hostages," the statement said.

The hostage situation was believed to be a reference to Colombia, where the French-Colombian politician Ingrid Betancourt has been held by kidnappers since 2002. Sarkozy's government actively has worked for her release.

The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, known by its Spanish acronym as FARC, said Dec. 18 it was prepared to release Betancourt and other hostages in exchange for Colombia releasing 500 FARC members from prison.

Following the normal protocol, Sarkozy and Pope Benedict exchanged gifts at the end of their meeting.

Sarkozy gave the pope three books: the president's own 2004 book, "The Republic, Religions and Hope," which included suggestions on how to help mainstream Muslim

groups integrate into French society; and early editions of "Joy" and "Deception," two works by Georges Bernanos, the author of "The Diary of a Country Priest."

The pope told Sarkozy he already had a first edition of one of Bernanos' books in his private library.

Making his own presentation, the pope told Sarkozy, "My gift is more modest" and presented him with a large, gold papal medal, a gift reserved to Catholic heads of state.

In the evening, Sarkozy was scheduled to continue a tradition dating back to the early 17th century; like French kings and several of the presidents who preceded him, Sarkozy was to be welcomed as an "honorary canon" of the Basilica of St. John Lateran.