

Pope: Meet challenges by focusing on Jesus

APARECIDA, Brazil – On a five-day visit to Latin America, Pope Benedict XVI identified a host of social and religious challenges and said the church should respond by focusing more clearly on the person of Jesus Christ.

“This is the faith that has made America the ‘continent of hope.’ Not a political ideology, not a social movement, not an economic system: faith in the God who is love – who took flesh, died and rose in Jesus Christ,” the pope said on the final day of his May 9-13 visit to Brazil.

It was a comment echoed in many of his encounters, which included a rally with young people, the canonization of the first Brazilian-born saint, and the inauguration of the Fifth General Conference of the Bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean.

The pope cited inroads by secularism, threats against the family and the institution of marriage, and an erosion of traditional Latin America values and said that in response the church needs to put greater emphasis on the religious education of its own members.

One big reason the evangelical sects have attracted Catholics, he told Brazilian bishops, is that many Catholics are insufficiently evangelized and their faith is weak, confused and easily shaken.

In a country where televangelists have had great success with simplistic religious messages, the pope did not hold out any easy solutions.

Instead, he said, the church should conduct “a methodical evangelization aimed at personal and communal fidelity to Christ.” Firm doctrinal content is essential to faith formation, he said, and at nearly every stop he suggested wider use of the Catechism of the Catholic Church.

The papal trip began May 9 with an in-flight press conference that prompted controversy when the pope, in response to a question, appeared to support the idea

of excommunication for pro-abortion politicians. The Vatican later released a toned-down version of the papal comments.

In Brazil, where pressures have been growing for legalized abortion, the pope mentioned protection of the unborn at several of his events, including a Sao Paulo airport welcoming ceremony attended by Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva. The pope told the president and assembled dignitaries that he had come to help reinforce Christian values and counter new threats to the poor, the abandoned and the unborn.

"I am well aware that the soul of this people, as of all Latin America, safeguards values that are radically Christian, which will never be eradicated," he said.

On May 10, the pope joined some 40,000 young people in a Sao Paulo soccer stadium for song, dance, prayer and a papal speech that laid out arguments for Christian virtue.

He warned against sexual infidelity, drug use and unethical routes to success and told the youths to live their lives "with enthusiasm and with joy, but most of all with a sense of responsibility."

The choreographed encounter was billed as an emotional highlight of the papal visit. The pope hugged some of the young people who spoke, but looked somewhat reserved throughout the event.

At a Mass May 11 on a Sao Paulo airfield, the pope canonized St. Antonio Galvao, an 18th-century Franciscan known for his charitable work. The pope said the saint's dedication to God and purity should be exemplary in a modern age "so full of hedonism."

On May 12 the pope rode deep into the Brazilian countryside to visit Fazenda da Esperanca, or Farm of Hope, a church-run drug rehabilitation center. After listening to testimonials from recovering addicts, the pope issued a warning to drug dealers:

"God will call you to account for your deeds," he said. "Human dignity cannot be trampled upon in this way."

Compared to the first days of the trip, the pope looked more at ease on the grounds of the farm, where he was cheered by 3,000 volunteers and residents and was given a group hug by four children.

That evening, he was even more animated when he met with thousands of priests, seminarians, religious and lay movement members in the Basilica of Our Lady Aparecida, Latin America's biggest Marian shrine.

After praying the rosary, the pope gave a spiritual pep talk that was repeatedly interrupted by applause, telling the congregation: "The church is our home. This is our home. In the Catholic Church we find all that is good."

At Mass outside the basilica the next day, the pope appeared to draw a distinction between the Catholic Church's missionary approach and the aggressive proselytizing by evangelical sects, which have flourished in Latin America.

"The church does not engage in proselytism. Instead, she grows by attraction," the pope said.

Before leaving Brazil, the largest Catholic country in the world, the pope delivered an opening address to the bishops' general conference, a speech that was greatly anticipated by the more than 260 participants.

The pope made several key points:

- The church best contributes to solving social and political problems by promoting a moral consensus on fundamental values - which must come before the construction of just social structures.
- Among Catholics, the bishops should give priority to Sunday Mass and more intense faith formation of young people and adults.
- Both Marxism and capitalism have failed to deliver on their ideological promises to build a better world, largely because they are systems divorced from individual morality. Along with his critique of capitalism and the growing rich-poor gap, the pope warned that globalization risks creating vast monopolies and treating profit as "the supreme value."
- The evangelization of the Americas was not the "imposition of a foreign culture,"

and any attempt to retrieve pre-Colombian indigenous religions would be “a step backward” for Latin Americans.