

Pope meets religious leaders, highlights God's role in human history

NAZARETH, Israel - Meeting with Catholic and other religious leaders in Nazareth, Pope Benedict XVI returned to a running theme of his Holy Land pilgrimage: that God intervenes in human history, offering people a real reason for hope.

The corollary to that theme is just as important to the pope: that when people try to shut God out of their lives and the life of society bad things happen.

The pope was in Nazareth May 14 for a day of liturgies and encounters as he neared the end of his eight-day trip to Jordan, Israel and the Palestinian territories.

After celebrating a morning Mass to mark the Holy Land's year of the family in the city where Jesus grew up, the pontiff met in the afternoon with about 300 members of various religious communities - including Christians, Muslims, Jews and Druze - in the Galilee region.

The atmosphere was friendly and respectful. At one point the pope, smiling broadly, stood with the other main participants and held hands in prayer with a rabbi and a Druze cleric as a specially composed psalm was sung, using the words of peace in Arabic, Hebrew and English: "Salam, Shalom, Lord grant us peace."

In a brief speech, the pope noted that Nazareth is revered by Christians as the place where an angel announced to Mary that she would conceive a child by the power of the Holy Spirit - a divine intervention, he said, that changed the world.

"The conviction that the world is a gift of God and that God has entered the twists and turns of human history is the perspective from which Christians view creation as having a reason and a purpose," he said.

Far from being the result of blind fate, he said, the world has been willed by God and reveals his splendor. That implies a particular responsibility for people, and it is

common ground for all faiths, he said.

“At the heart of all religious traditions is the conviction that peace itself is a gift from God, yet it cannot be achieved without human endeavor. Lasting peace flows from the recognition that the world is ultimately not our own,” he said.

“We cannot do whatever we please with the world; rather, we are called to conform our choices to the subtle yet nonetheless perceptible laws inscribed by the Creator upon the universe,” he said.

In a nutshell, that’s been the core religious message of his pilgrimage. As he has visited the places where the events of the Old and New Testaments were lived out – from Mount Nebo above the Promised Land to the Upper Room in Jerusalem – he has reminded people that these are the places where God acted in history, and that current tensions in the region require a similar openness to divine guidance.

The pope prayed at the Grotto of the Annunciation, a cave enshrined in the lower level of Nazareth’s Basilica of the Annunciation. In the basilica’s upper level he led an evening prayer service, listening as the Magnificat, the canticle of Mary, was sung in Arabic.

What happened in Nazareth, the pope said in a talk, was a “singular act of God” that illustrates the unlimited possibilities of God’s love and power.

The narrative of the Annunciation also illustrates “God’s extraordinary courtesy,” because instead of imposing himself on Mary or predetermining her role in salvation, he first seeks her consent. Her response changed the course of history, he said.

“When we reflect on this joyful mystery, it gives us hope, the sure hope that God will continue to reach into our history, to act with creative power so as to achieve goals which by human reckoning seem impossible,” he said.

The important thing is that people remain open to the “transforming action of the creator Spirit who makes us new,” he said.