

Pope opens possibility of US visit, says faith builds strong families

By Carol Glatz

Catholic News Service

MILAN - As Pope Benedict XVI closed the World Meeting of Families in Italy's capital of finance and fashion, he opened the possibility of his heading to the United States when he named the Archdiocese of Philadelphia the next venue of the world gathering.

"God willing," he said, he would attend in 2015 as he greeted Archbishop Charles J. Chaput of Philadelphia and "the Catholics of that great city," saying he looked forward to meeting U.S. Catholics and other families from around the world there.

The surprise announcement came as the 85-year-old pope wrapped up the May 30 to June 3 world meeting, which gathers every three years to celebrate and help families live out their Christian values.

About 1 million people from 153 countries braved dawn wake-up calls, shouldered supply-laden backpacks and prodded along sleepy kids to descend on Milan's Bresso Park June 3 to take part in the event's closing Mass.

In his homily, the pope called for church unity, emphasized marriage as between a man and a woman, urged parents to keep the transcendent alive in a world that adores the high-tech over high ideals, and urged kids to respect and love their family.

Because the five-day meeting's theme was how to balance work demands, family needs and religious celebration, the pope upbraided economic theories that advocate that the best policies, markets and work ethics are those that push the most product and reap the most profit.

“The one-sided logic of sheer utility and maximum profit are not conducive to harmonious development, to the good of the family or to building of a more just society, because it brings in its wake ferocious competition, strong inequalities, degradation of the environment, the race for consumer goods and family tensions,” he said.

Such a “utilitarian mentality” takes a toll on the family and social relationships “reducing them to a fragile convergence of individual interests and undermining the solidity of the social fabric,” he added.

The pope spent nearly three full days at a variety of events: meeting local citizens, religious, government and business leaders and Catholic young people and families from around the world.

He also was treated to a concert of Ludwig van Beethoven’s Symphony No. 9 at Milan’s famed La Scala opera house.

Despite the jubilant and festive air among participants, the pope and archdiocesan leaders peppered their speeches with reminders of the thousands of people rendered homeless or destitute by a recent series of earthquakes in northern Italy.

The pope called for concrete aid to those in need, assuring victims of his prayers.

The archdiocese announced that a half-billion euro had been collected during the papal visit and would be given in the pope’s name to those hardest hit. The pope’s own charity recently donated a large sum and the pope met personally with a couple who lost their home and were living in tents.

Pope Benedict also hosted a lunch for 100 poor families – about 300 people – who live in Milan, but come from a variety of countries.

God, who suffered with humanity and for humanity, made people capable of sharing the suffering of others and of turning that pain into love, he said at La Scala June 1.

He urged faith communities and secular governments at events June 1-2 to work together for the common good by having people of faith live their values in all areas of life.

The church offers its teaching and input as a service to society, he said, as he urged governments to be just and guarantee liberty, based on natural law, for everyone “beginning with the right to life of which its deliberate suppression can never be allowed.”

Inside Milan’s monumental Gothic cathedral June 2, the pope met women and men religious, priests, seminarians and bishops for a prayer service in the Ambrosian rite. A religious vocation and one’s personal well-being are not at odds, the pope said, but go hand-in-hand since being a good priest or sister and a happy person both find its source in drawing closer to Christ.

Later that day in Milan’s San Siro soccer stadium, the pope told some 80,000 boys and girls who were or would be recently confirmed that they, too, can be saints as they let the Holy Spirit guide them to use their talents for the good of the community.

“You are called to great things,” he said, so keep one’s aims high. Study and work hard, obey one’s parents, help others and be selfless “because egoism is the enemy of joy.”

At an evening vigil marked by testimonies from families all over the world and international music by well-known artists, the pope shared the joys and sufferings of the world’s families.

Five couples and families went up on stage one group at a time to ask the pope a personal question or appeal for advice.

The first, a 7-year-old girl from Vietnam, sat by the pope’s feet, wanting to know what it was like growing up in his home.

Aware of the content of each question beforehand, the pope spoke off-the-cuff, saying even though Germany at the time was suffering from a dictatorship and war, his childhood was “unforgettable” and joyful as their home was always filled with music, faith, love and long walks in the woods.

“To tell you the truth, if I could imagine what it will be like in heaven, I always imagine the time of my youth, of my childhood,” he said.

When a Greek family told the pope about their dire economic situation back home and asked how they could go forward in hope, the pope said words could never convey his sadness for people hit hard by the global economic crisis and the sadness over feeling unable to help.

He criticized the current political state of affairs, saying all political parties had to become more responsible and stop promising things they couldn't deliver.

Candidates need to see that the votes people invest in them are not votes for the leaders but are a call for them to fight and be responsible for the good of all people, he said.

He said one idea for people to help right away was for more financially stable parishes and families to adopt a struggling family or parish akin to the twin cities' initiative.

A Brazilian couple who work with divorced or separated Catholics asked how they could give the people they talk to hope.

The pope acknowledged the huge sense of loss and alienation divorced or remarried Catholics feel when they can no longer receive the sacraments. While preventing a marriage from breaking up is ideal through counseling and accompaniment, parishes could help divorcees still feel part of the community, experiencing the word of God and getting ongoing spiritual guidance, he said.

While they cannot receive the sacrament of the Eucharist, they can experience a spiritual form of communion, by being united in the body of Christ as church, he said.

The pope ate lunch together with seven families after the June 3 Mass. They included Allen and Janell Tuncap and their five children from Charleston, S.C.; the Green family including their seminarian son, Jack, from the diocese of Parramatta, Australia; and families from Baghdad, Iraq, Kinshasa, Congo, Mexico City, Spain and Milan.

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