

# Pope says divisions, abandoning tradition weaken Christian witness

NEW YORK – Using unusually strong words for an ecumenical prayer service, Pope Benedict XVI said the witness of Christians in the world is weakened not only by their divisions, but also by some communities turning their backs on Christian tradition.

“Communion with the church in every age,” he said, is needed particularly “at the time when the world is losing its bearings and needs a persuasive common witness to the saving power of the Gospel.”

The pope met April 18 with about 250 representatives of U.S. ecumenical organizations and a dozen Christian churches and denominations for evening prayer at St. Joseph’s Church in New York.

He began by praising the ecumenical commitment of U.S. Christians and acknowledging that the agreements found in their theological dialogues have contributed to the theological agreements later forged by the Vatican and its official dialogue partners.

But Pope Benedict also focused on ways the Christian obligation to share the good news of the Gospel suffers in the modern world.

“Too often those who are not Christians, as they observe the splintering of Christian communities, are understandably confused about the Gospel message itself,” he said.

But another, growing problem lies in the fact that “fundamental Christian beliefs and practices are sometimes changed within communities by so-called ‘prophetic actions’ that are based” on a reading of Christianity “not always consonant” with that found in the Bible and in Christian tradition.

While the pope did not offer specific examples, he has in the past questioned Christian communities that have decided to ordain women to the priesthood and

episcopacy or to bless homosexual unions and ordain openly gay men and women.

The pope's concerns obviously extend to the Anglican Communion and its troubled relations with the U.S. Episcopal Church and some dioceses in Canada.

The Anglican Communion is attempting to find ways to strengthen its structures for ensuring that one national member does not take actions that make other members of the communion uncomfortable. At times, bishops have been named to oversee pastoral care of members who do not go along with the changes.

Pope Benedict said it was unfortunate that some church communities have given up "the attempt to act as a unified body, choosing instead to function according to the idea of 'local options.'"

The pope said he was concerned that in a world marked by a greater sense of global unity and interdependence, the feeling of "fragmentation and a retreat into individualism" is seen in Christian denominations just as it is in the world at large.

The unity of the early Christian community and the cohesion of its members "was based on the sound integrity of their doctrinal confession," the pope said.

But now, he said, there are signs that some Christians are taking the same "relativistic approach" to doctrine that many modern people take to moral and ethical values in general.

Christians cannot pretend that there is no such a thing as Christian truth, he said. The Christian faith is not a matter of picking and choosing what to believe and what to discard from the Scriptures and Christian tradition.

When Christians think they only need to follow their own consciences and find a church that suits their individual tastes, the result is a "continual proliferation of communities which often eschew institutional structures and minimize the importance of doctrinal content for Christian living," he said.

Pope Benedict said that when a church, like the Catholic Church, asserts its doctrines, it is not throwing up an obstacle to progress in Christian unity.

“A clear, convincing testimony to the salvation wrought for us in Christ Jesus has to be based upon the notion of normative apostolic teaching,” he said. Christians must hold the faith that Jesus gave to his apostles.

Only by holding on to the sure teaching of the Gospel, he said, will the Christian churches be able to find the basis for unity and for a united witness to a troubled world.