

Pope takes aim at abortion, same-sex marriage in Portugal

FATIMA, Portugal - On his third day in Portugal, Pope Benedict XVI took aim at two issues that have deeply disturbed church leaders in the predominantly Catholic country: abortion and gay marriage.

The pope said abortion and efforts to promote same-sex marriage were “insidious and dangerous threats to the common good,” and he encouraged pastoral workers in Portugal to keep up their efforts to protect the unborn and the traditional family.

He made his remarks in a meeting May 13 at the Marian sanctuary of Fatima with more than 1,000 church workers engaged in social pastoral programs.

Abortion was liberalized in Portugal in 2007 after a popular referendum. Legislation allowing gay marriage is expected to become law in a few days.

The pope did not call for a repeal of the abortion law, which allows for induced abortion on request during the first 10 weeks of pregnancy and during the first 24 weeks of gestation under special circumstances.

Instead, he encouraged the church’s pastoral force to try to prevent situations that result in abortions and to promote spiritual healing for those who have had them.

“I express my deep appreciation for all those social and pastoral initiatives aimed at combating the socio-economic and cultural mechanisms that lead to abortion and are openly concerned to defend life and to promote the reconciliation and healing of those harmed by the tragedy of abortion,” he said, drawing applause from the audience.

“Initiatives aimed at protecting the essential and primary values of life, beginning at conception, and of the family based on the indissoluble marriage between a man and a woman, help to respond to some of today’s most insidious and dangerous threats to the common good,” he said.

That line prompted even longer applause and smiles among his listeners.

The papal encounter took place in the Church of the Most Holy Trinity, a vast modern building that stands across from the site where Mary appeared to three shepherd children in 1917. The place erupted in cheers as the 83-year-old pontiff, looking somewhat tired, entered and took his seat on the altar. He delivered his speech in fluent Portuguese.

He said the church's efforts on such issues as abortion correspond well with Mary's message at Fatima, which he summed up as "penance, prayer and forgiveness aimed at the conversion of hearts."

In broader social areas, the pope said the church's programs were crucial to its aim of spreading the Gospel and forming a new generation of "servant leaders" who are able to humanize society.

"History presently offers us a scenario of socio-economic, cultural and spiritual crisis, which highlights the need for a discernment guided by a creative proposal of the church's social message," he said.

Intellectual awareness of the church's social teaching is not enough; those teachings need to be implemented in practical ways, he said.

Those in attendance include laity and religious, young and old, men and women of all ages, and children. The pope thanked them above all for their "compassion to the poor, the infirm, prisoners, the lonely and abandoned, the disabled, children and the elderly, migrants, the unemployed and all those who experience needs which compromise personal dignity and freedom."

The church in Portugal runs a large network of social services, including 34 hospitals, 155 clinics, nearly 800 homes for the elderly and disabled, 660 orphanages and nursery schools, and more than 450 centers for special education.

The church also has 55 centers for family counseling and the protection of human life.