

Pope tells bishops of serious challenges to faith

APARECIDA, Brazil - In calling for a "renewal and revitalization of faith" in Latin America and the Caribbean, Pope Benedict XVI warned against a revival of indigenous religions, said the church should work for justice but not become directly involved in politics, and criticized both Marxism and capitalism for their detachment from "the decisive reality which is God."

Speaking at the opening session May 13 of a meeting of Latin American and Caribbean bishops that will set directions for the region for the next decade, the pope said the faith "has serious challenges to address, because the harmonious development of society and the Catholic identity of (the region's) peoples are in jeopardy."

Looking back at the more than 500 years since Catholic missionaries first arrived in the Americas, the pontiff said early evangelization was not "the imposition of a foreign culture" on the region's indigenous peoples, but led to "a synthesis between their cultures and the Christian faith."

In recent years there has been renewed interest in traditional indigenous religions, particularly in Andean and Central American countries; an Indian theology movement of indigenous Catholic theologians also has arisen.

In an apparent reference to more radical movements that promote a revival of indigenous religions, the pope warned that "the utopia of going back to breathe life into the pre-Columbus religions ... would be a step back."

He underscored the "rich and profound popular religiousness" that grew out of the melding of indigenous and Christian beliefs and is one of the most obvious outward expressions of Catholicism in Latin America. He called that tradition a "precious treasure" that "must be protected, promoted and, when necessary, purified."

This gathering of bishops is the fifth in a series that began in 1955 in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, and continued with meetings in Medellin, Colombia, in 1968; Puebla, Mexico,

in 1972; and Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic, in 1992. While the May 13-31 meeting is a continuation of those deliberations, the pope said “many things have changed in society” since the last meeting.

Describing the social situation that the bishops must address, he said globalization brings people together, but is accompanied by “the risk of vast monopolies and of treating profit as the supreme value.”

The pope noted weaknesses in both political responses to the region’s challenges and the response by church communities.

In the political realm, he criticized both Marxist-inspired governments and those that have implemented neoliberal economic policies. Saying “there has been notable progress toward democracy,” he expressed concern about “authoritarian forms of government and regimes wedded to certain ideologies that we thought had been superseded,” an apparent reference to the election of left-leaning governments in countries such as Venezuela and Bolivia.

At the same time, he noted that in countries with liberal economies, “increasing sectors of society” are “oppressed by immense poverty or even despoiled of their own natural resources.”

While praising the efforts of catechists and lay movements and the church’s educational and charitable works, the pontiff said there has been “a certain weakening of Christian life in society overall” and in the church “due to secularism, hedonism, indifferentism and proselytism by numerous sects, animist religions and new pseudoreligious phenomena.”

Noting that “the church has the great task of guarding and nourishing the faith of the people of God and reminding the faithful that ... they are called to be disciples and missionaries,” the pope emphasized that catechesis and Sunday Mass must be the foundations of church life.

It is “necessary to intensify the catechesis and the faith formation not only of children, but also of young people and adults,” he said, a task that must be done not only through homilies, lectures and courses, but with other methods, including the

print and electronic media and Internet.

Calling Sunday Mass “an effective way of teaching the faith,” the pope urged families to participate together in the weekly Eucharist. He made no mention of the particular challenge this poses in Latin America, which is home to 43 percent of the world’s Catholics but has about 7,000 lay people per priest, the highest ratio in the world.

In some rural areas, such as the Andes, a priest visits villages only once a year. Those communities depend on lay leaders for catechesis and liturgies. In some areas the shortage of priests has been a factor in the rise of evangelical churches.

Focusing on the region’s “urgent social and political problems” and the “challenge of poverty and destitution,” the pope said that “just structures are ... an indispensable condition for a just society” but, while both Marxism and Western-style capitalism promised such structures, neither has delivered.

Marxism, he said, has left “a sad heritage of economic and ecological destruction” and “a painful destruction of the human spirit,” while in the West “the distance between rich and poor is growing constantly and giving rise to a worrying degradation of personal dignity through drugs, alcohol and deceptive illusions of happiness.”

Just structures and the values underlying them “do not arise from ideologies nor from their premises,” but depend on consensus, the pope said.

While saying the church must contribute to that task, he warned against direct church involvement in politics.

“The church is the advocate of justice and of the poor precisely because she does not identify with politicians nor with partisan interests,” he said. Instead, the church’s role is to teach “values, guide consciences and offer a life choice that goes beyond the political sphere,” he said.

Lay Catholics, meanwhile, have as “their responsibility and their mission” the task of bringing “the light of the Gospel into public life, into culture, economics and politics.”

At the end of his speech, the pope briefly addressed certain groups within the church – families, priests, religious and consecrated lay people, the laity in general and youth.

He noted that the family is under siege from “secularism and by ethical relativism,” migration, poverty, social instability and “civil legislation opposed to marriage.” He also criticized the persistent “chauvinist mentality” that denies the “equal dignity and responsibility of women” and called for government support for families in which women “wish to dedicate themselves fully to bringing up their children.”

In a region in which youth make up the majority of the population, the pope said that young people “are not afraid of sacrifice, but of a meaningless life.” He called for them to oppose “the facile illusions of instant happiness” and “every form of violence,” but offered no guidance on how to keep young people in the church.

While 71 percent of Latin Americans consider themselves Catholic, according to a survey by the Latinobarometro polling firm in 2005, when the pope was elected, the figure was highest – 76 percent – among people over age 60, and only 66 percent among those between ages 16 and 25.

That topic was likely to come up for discussion among the bishops over the next two and a half weeks, along with others that the pope did not mention directly in his speech, such as the loss of Catholics to evangelical churches, the challenges of evangelization in large urban areas and reaching people who claim to profess no religion.

The Fifth General Conference of Bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean brings together 266 church people from throughout the hemisphere; of those, 162 are bishops with voice and vote. The pope chose the theme of discipleship and mission, and the meeting is expected to end with a call for a renewed missionary effort in the church in the region.