

Pope tells Ecuadorean bishops Catholics are obligated to defend life

VATICAN CITY - Defending the values of human life and the family is not always easy, but it is an obligation all Catholics - clergy and laity - share, Pope Benedict XVI said.

Meeting the bishops of Ecuador Oct. 16, the pope thanked them for defending basic human values during their country's campaign to draft and pass a new constitution.

"I want to thank you for the efforts you are making, not without great sacrifice, to draw society's attention to those values that made human life more just and marked by solidarity," the pope told the bishops at their "ad limina" visits to the Vatican. Heads of dioceses are required to make these visits every five years to report on the status of their dioceses.

Archbishop Antonio Arregui Yarza of Guayaquil, president of the Ecuadorean bishops' conference, told the pope that the bishops' July statement on potential dangers in the new constitution provoked "a very strong reaction on the part of the regime."

The archbishop said the government used "aggressive and inaccurate propaganda" to paint the bishops as political supporters of the opposition.

"We place our (country's) uncertain future in God's hands," he said, adding that the bishops are committed to "a comprehensive, generous and constructive dialogue" with the government once a new legislature is in place.

The new constitution, which the bishops said did not clearly proclaim the right to life and define marriage as the union of a man and a woman, won the approval of more than 60 percent of the electorate in September.

A National Assembly is expected to be formed before the end of October and it will

serve as a parliament until new legislative elections are held in 2009.

Pope Benedict told the bishops, "In this important phase of history, the church in Ecuador needs a mature and committed laity that, with a solid doctrinal formation and a deep interior life, will live its specific vocation: to enlighten all human, social, cultural and political reality with the light of Christ."

At the same time, he said, the bishops have an obligation to "offer the entire community your proper contribution through reflection and moral judgments, including those on political questions that touch the dignity of the human person."