

Pope to address broad spectrum of U.S. Catholic educators

WASHINGTON - When Pope Benedict XVI comes to Washington this spring, he will deliver a one-hour address on Catholic education April 17 to presidents of U.S. Catholic colleges and universities and Catholic school superintendents from every U.S. diocese and archdiocese.

The gathering will take place on the campus of The Catholic University of America.

This will not be the first time a pope has visited the university established in 1887 by the U.S. bishops as their national university. In 1979, during his first trip to the United States as pope, Pope John Paul II addressed theologians, scholars and presidents of Catholic colleges and universities at Catholic University.

In his speech he defended academic freedom for theologians but warned that they should not spread theories that might be confusing or troubling to Catholics. He also thanked Catholic university leaders for their role in educating and evangelizing and for their dedication "despite immense financial strain, enrollment problems and other obstacles."

Eight years later, Pope John Paul again addressed Catholic higher education officials and a group of about 1,800 Catholic elementary and secondary teachers and religious educators in New Orleans.

His meeting with Catholic college and university leaders was held at Xavier University, the only historically black Catholic university in the United States.

The gathering took place as Catholic higher education officials worldwide debated what effect a much-anticipated apostolic constitution from Pope John Paul would have on Catholic higher education. The document, "Ex Corde Ecclesiae" ("From the Heart of the Church"), was issued in 1990.

The 49-page document followed more than a decade of preparation involving Vatican departments and Catholic educators around the world.

In his 1987 speech the pope just briefly addressed one of the key points in the document that focused on giving greater administrative control of Catholic universities to church hierarchy. He told the group of more than 1,000 Catholic higher education leaders that bishops must be participants in Catholic colleges and universities and that the work of theologians has to be tested by the church's teaching authority.

During the meeting with teachers from Catholic schools and religious educators, Pope John Paul listened while they shared their achievements and challenges. He also thanked them for their academic excellence, community service and work with poor and minority students.

Now, as more than 200 U.S. Catholic college and university leaders and about 200 school officials were gearing up for another papal address, the educational setting has somewhat shifted. In higher education, school officials are no longer debating what might be in the Vatican document on higher education, because they have the document in hand.

In 1999, the U.S. bishops approved a document specifying how they would implement "Ex Corde Ecclesiae" and, specifically, how they would define the "mandatum" - or church authorization granted by the local bishop to teach theology. The document was confirmed by the Vatican in 2000.

"Much of the heat has dissipated" on "Ex Corde Ecclesiae," said Richard Yanikoski, president of the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities in Washington.

He speculated that Pope Benedict might "reiterate the central thesis" of the document but with an emphasis on progress made by colleges and the growing secular changes they face. Mr. Yanikoski noted that campuses today are not the same as they were 20 years ago, because they focus on global issues and international students make up a larger percentage of the student body.

He said the fact that the pope is not planning to address parish religious educators in this gathering might indicate that he means to narrow his focus solely on the "positive contributions" Catholic schools makes to the church and society.

Mr. Yanikoski noted that the pope's address is scheduled for television broadcast, and said that suggests the pope "has a larger audience in mind" and will most likely give a "positive, inclusive statement."

He said Catholic college presidents have expressed regret they will not have an opportunity for dialogue with the pope, but they also understand the pontiff's tight schedule during his U.S. visit.

Karen Ristau, president of the National Catholic Educational Association in Washington, said she expected the gathering with Pope Benedict will give educators a lot of encouragement, as did the meeting she attended with Pope John Paul in 1987.

The fact that he is taking time during a limited visit to meet with them, she said, is a "very strong statement about how important Catholic education is."

Ms. Ristau said Catholic educators have many of the same concerns today that they addressed with Pope John Paul 21 years ago.

One big change since the previous gathering is the significant decrease in the number of U.S. Catholic schools; it is down from 9,102 in 1987 to 7,498, according to the latest statistics available from the 2006-07 school year. Last year, 2.3 million students attended Catholic schools compared with 2.7 million in 1987.

Even though the Catholic University gathering will encompass kindergarten to postgraduate-level education, Ms. Ristau said the single gathering reflects the "wonderful collaboration" that has been growing among educators as they focus on Catholic education "being a piece of our whole lives."