

# **Pope urges Catholics in secular society to increase prayers, charity**

CASTEL GANDOLFO, Italy - As reminders of God and the notion of Christian values gradually disappear from public life in even traditionally Catholic countries, people must respond by strengthening their prayer life and increasing their acts of charity, Pope Benedict XVI said.

Looking at the situation in Panama, the pope praised “the fruitful missionary activity of priests, religious and laity, which contrasts with the increasing secularization of society.”

Pope Benedict met Sept. 18 with the bishops of Panama, who were making their “ad limina” visits to the Vatican to report on the status of their dioceses.

The pope said secularization is a process “that pervades all aspects of daily life, developing a mentality in which God is absent from existence and from human consciousness.”

The process is often aided by “the media, which disseminate individualism, hedonism and ideologies and customs that undermine the very foundations of marriage, family and Christian morality,” he said.

The role of the bishops, priests, religious and committed laypeople is to help Catholics understand that “the disciple of Christ finds the strength to respond to these challenges through a deep knowledge and sincere love of the lord Jesus, in meditating upon the Scriptures, in proper spiritual and doctrinal formation, in constant prayer, in receiving the sacrament of reconciliation frequently, in consciously and actively participating in the Mass and in the practice of works of

charity and mercy.”

Bishop Jose Lacunza Maestrojuan of David, president of the Panamanian bishops’ conference, told Vatican Radio Sept. 16 that while 85 percent of his country’s residents say they are Catholic “it has become a cultural Christianity, not a conviction or choice.”

“Therefore, it is a Christianity that succumbs easily to any kind of attack, whether on the part of political or religious ideologies, such as the spread of sects,” he said.

Bishop Lacunza said that in the past two years groups with funding from organizations outside Panama have tried to push health care legislation and educational programs that promote the use of contraceptives.

The pope told the bishops, “There are many families in your homeland living the Christian ideal with dedication in the midst of many difficulties that threaten the soundness of conjugal love, responsible parenthood and the harmony and stability of the home.”

The church, he said, can never do enough to develop strong pastoral programs to support families, “to invite people to discover the beauty of the vocation of Christian marriage, to defend human life from conception to its natural end and to build homes in which children are educated in love for the truth of the Gospel and solid human values.”