

Pope urges greater religious freedom in Cuba, criticizes U.S. embargo

VATICAN CITY - Welcoming Cuba's new ambassador to the Vatican, Pope Benedict XVI once again criticized the U.S. economic embargo against the country, but also called on the Cuban government to expand religious freedom on the island.

The pope told Ambassador Eduardo Delgado Bermudez Dec. 10 that he knows Cubans are suffering from the economic crisis, which "together with the devastating effects of natural disasters and the economic embargo particularly strikes poorer people and their families."

Pope Benedict said he hoped that the "signs of detente in relations with the nearby United States would signal new opportunities for a mutually beneficial rapprochement."

In his speech to the pope, Delgado described the embargo as "cruel and unilateral" and said that it "constitutes an act of genocide because it aims at making our heroic and generous people surrender out of hunger, sickness and poverty."

The financial crisis, the pope said, highlights "the urgent need for an economy that is build on solid ethical bases and places the person and his or her rights and material and spiritual well-being at the center of its interests."

The first asset governments must protect is the human person, Pope Benedict said.

The pope said the Catholic Church has been trying to help suffering Cubans and, thanks to a new government willingness to cooperate, it was able to take part in emergency relief and reconstruction efforts after hurricanes struck the island in 2008.

"I hope concrete signs of openness to the exercise of religious freedom continue to multiply as they have in recent years," the pope said. In particular, he asked for "the

opportunity to celebrate Holy Mass in some prisons, to conduct religious processions, for the repair and return of some churches and the construction of houses for religious, (and) the possibility that priests and religious could receive social security. In this way, the Catholic community could more freely exercise its specific pastoral task.”

The pope told the ambassador the nation’s Catholic community is energetically preparing for the 2012 celebration of the 400th anniversary of the discovery of the image of Our Lady of Charity of El Cobre, Cuba’s patroness.

Pope Benedict said the Cuban people’s Marian devotion is a sign of their religiosity and of the fact that their culture has been permeated by the Catholic faith.

The church, he said, does not want to meddle in Cuban politics, but it does want to be able to continue to nourish the “extraordinary spiritual and moral heritage that contributed in a decisive way to forging the Cuban soul.”

Pope Benedict said modern Cubans, especially the young, need to “rediscover those moral, human and spiritual values, for example the respect for life from the moment of conception to its natural end.”

“The principal service the church renders to Cubans is the proclamation of Jesus Christ and his message of love, forgiveness and reconciliation in truth,” the pope said. “A people who follow this path of harmony is a people with hope for a better future.”