

Pope urges U.S. church to ‘put aside all anger’ and unite

NEW YORK - Celebrating Mass in St. Patrick’s Cathedral in New York, Pope Benedict XVI urged the Catholic Church in the United States to move past divisions and scandal toward a “new sense of unity and purpose.”

The pope, celebrating Mass April 19 with bishops, priests, religious and seminarians, once again addressed the damage and suffering caused by the clerical sex abuse scandal and called for a time of purification and healing.

More generally, he said it was time to “put aside all anger and contention” inside the church and embark on a fresh mission of evangelization in society.

The pope was celebrating the third anniversary of his election, and he arrived to congratulations from New York Cardinal Edward M. Egan and an ovation from the 3,000 people who packed the cathedral.

“We are greatly honored that you begin your fourth year as universal shepherd here with us,” the cardinal said.

The setting was New York’s 130-year-old Gothic cathedral, built with “the pennies of the poor,” as Cardinal Egan said. In his homily, the pope used the building’s architectural harmony as a metaphor for the church’s inner unity.

Just as the cathedral’s stained-glass windows flood the interior with splendor, he said, the beauty of life in the church can really only be understood and experienced from the inside.

Yet sometimes “the light of faith can be dimmed by routine, and the splendor of the church obscured by the sins and weaknesses of her members,” he said.

“For all of us, I think, one of the great disappointments which followed the Second Vatican Council, with its call for a greater engagement in the church’s mission to the world, has been the experience of division between different groups, different generations, different members of the same religious family,” he said.

The pope said it was important for everyone in the church to open themselves to points of view that “may not necessarily conform to our own ideas or assumptions.”

This is the way to hear what the Spirit is saying, he said.

The pope’s words had particular resonance in the Archdiocese of New York, where in 2006 an anonymous letter circulating among priests spoke of low morale among the clergy and called for a vote of “no confidence” in Cardinal Egan.

A priests’ council convened by the cardinal then denounced the letter, saying it was being used to damage the church.

The cathedral itself has been the site of protests in recent years over church teaching on abortion, homosexuality and other issues.

The pope said all those in the cathedral were “called to be forces of unity within Christ’s body.” A first step, he said, is to seek inner reconciliation through penance.

He noted that he has already spoken several times during his U.S. trip about the suffering caused by priestly sex abuse. Today, he said, he wanted to assure the priests and religious of his spiritual closeness as they respond to the continuing challenges of the scandal.

“I join you in praying that this will be a time of purification for each and every

particular church and religious community, and a time for healing. I also encourage you to cooperate with your bishops, who continue to work effectively to resolve this issue," he said.

The pope said the church must be a "beacon of hope" in today's world, and that means promoting a culture of life.

"The proclamation of life, life in abundance, must be the heart of the new evangelization," he said.

"This is the message of hope we are called to proclaim and embody in a world where self-centeredness, greed, violence and cynicism so often seem to choke the fragile growth of grace in people's hearts," he said.

The church, he said, must work in a society that "sometimes seems to have forgotten God and to resent even the most elementary demands of Christian morality."

At the same time, the church's leaders and its pastors should also make it clear to people that the faith is more than a set of rules, he said.

"Perhaps we have lost sight of this: In a society where the church seems legalistic and 'institutional' to many people, our most urgent challenge is to communicate the joy born of faith and the experience of God's love," he said.

The pontiff pointed to the late Father Michael J. McGivney, founder of the Knights of Columbus, as a model of pastoral vision and zeal. His sainthood cause recently took a step forward at the Vatican.