

Pope's visit to United Nations 'eagerly awaited,' says Vatican nuncio

NEW YORK - Pope Benedict XVI's April 18 visit to the United Nations "is eagerly awaited because the pope is seen as a moral authority offering clear guidance on the foundational values of life and of human society," said the Vatican's U.N. ambassador.

"In this sense the pope is considered an authority able to interpret and rally political will to work for the good of the international community," said Archbishop Celestino Migliore, the ambassador, or nuncio.

The archbishop spoke to Catholic News Service at the headquarters of the Permanent Observer Mission of the Holy See in New York and provided written answers to questions submitted in advance.

Pope Benedict will address the U.N. General Assembly the morning of April 18, after a brief flight from Washington, where he arrives April 15. He returns to Rome the evening of April 20.

Asked how U.N. member nations regard the Catholic Church, Archbishop Migliore said they respect the church's "contribution to keep alive, nurture and refresh the dimension of spirituality and transcendence, without which our society would fall apart."

Because of the church's "strong message of universal brotherhood, reconciliation and closeness to the people," countries look to the church "for dialogue and cooperation on development," he added.

U.N. agencies, funds and programs concerned with education, development, humanitarian assistance, peacekeeping and advocacy on human rights, he said, "work very closely with the local churches ... even in the farthest corners of the world."

He said it is appropriate that the Catholic Church, which has diplomatic relations with 177 countries, maintains “a proactive presence” at the United Nations “to help shape the debate and the decisions, especially on fundamental values like life and freedom, justice and peace, coexistence and the well-being of the world population.”

Among issues to be tackled this year by the United Nations, the one the church is most concerned about is addressing the needs of the world’s 1 billion people “left behind by global economic growth,” Archbishop Migliore said. They are “the forgotten ones,” he added.

In outlining priorities for 2008, U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has committed the United Nations to help make the world “more prosperous and healthy” and has proposed the U.N. make it the year of the “bottom billion,” the archbishop said.

The United Nations also has “to stay the course in many old and new situations of conflict, of fragile peace,” and where the “early symptoms of gross violations of human rights” are emerging, the archbishop said.

It takes “a strong political will” and “a sensitivity ... to fundamental human values” to make decisions and implement mechanisms that “effectively work for the common good, the practice of a culture of peace, and a firm commitment to the responsibility to protect,” he said.

Currently 192 U.N. member states make up the General Assembly, the main deliberative U.N. body. Various organs of the United Nations make recommendations to member governments, but under the U.N. Charter only the Security Council has the power to make decisions member governments must carry out.

The council has five permanent seats, held by China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom and the United States, and 10 temporary seats that rotate among other countries every two years. Permanent members can veto resolutions.

Critics of the council say it seems unable to act decisively when confronted with a crisis.

Regarding such criticism, Archbishop Migliore said he gets “terribly frustrated and

critical when I see that the U.N. cannot devise or put in place an effective mechanism to prevent, stop or reverse situations of gross violations of human rights.”

But he said his frustration is not aimed at the United Nations itself or any one country, but at mechanisms countries will not change so they can “preserve certain interests or maintain a balance of power” rather than respond “to the real demands of the peoples of the world.”

The United Nations is “an indispensable forum,” he added.

Among its accomplishments, the archbishop said, are treaties and conventions – including those on the rights of children, the disabled, and migrants and refugees – that are “vital, legally binding instruments in assuring respect for human dignity and rights.”

He said its International Criminal Court and special tribunals have helped to “restore trust in justice and stop or deter impunity” in regions or countries “marked by wars and massacres.”

He also pointed out U.N. humanitarian assistance to countries suffering man-made and natural calamities and efforts to fight HIV/AIDS.

And while frustrations exist in the area of disarmament, he said the United Nations has made progress destroying stockpiles of chemical and biological weapons and preventing weapons of mass destruction from falling into the hands of terrorists and others.

Peacekeeping operations are “the apple of the eye of the U.N.,” he said.

They have not always succeeded – and “a few times may have failed miserably” – but U.N. peacekeeping efforts have kept tensions in many places “from becoming full-blown armed conflicts or stopped armed conflicts or massive violations of human rights and restored peace and the rule of law.”

As a permanent observer to the United Nations, the Vatican cannot vote, but Archbishop Migliore said it closely follows and actively participates in negotiations

on conventions, resolutions or decisions about peace and security; development; the environment; the rights of children, women and the elderly; human rights; information and culture; and peace-building.

“We plead for and try to advance innumerable humanitarian causes brought to our attention,” he added.

However, he said his most “important daily activity takes place very early in the morning,” when he celebrates Mass.

“Daily meditation on the word of God sheds light on the questions of the day,” he said.

“At the initial rite of reconciliation, I bring before the Lord my sins and those of the U.N. family in its slow response that penalizes the poor, in its verbosity, in its smoke-screening and delaying tactics during certain debates that result in nonaction, in its impertinence, at times, of wanting to substitute itself for God in many ways,” Archbishop Migliore said.

“The miracle worked by Jesus does not stop at the transformation of bread into his body, but extends to the church and to the entire human family,” he said.

The consecration is “a lesson of humility and tenacity ... because conflicts are always with us, but unity is created” by Christ, he added.