

Venezuelan president demands papal apology

CARACAS, Venezuela – Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez has demanded that Pope Benedict XVI apologize for saying that Europeans did not impose Catholicism on native Americans.

“As chief of state, I implore His Holiness to offer apologies to the peoples of our America,” President Chavez said in a mid-May broadcast over Venezuelan radio and television. “How can (the pope) go and say that they came – when they came with rifles to evangelize – that they came with no kind of imposition?”

During his speech inaugurating the May 13-31 Fifth General Conference of the Bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean, Pope Benedict said Catholic missionaries’ early evangelization was not “the imposition of a foreign culture” on the region’s indigenous peoples, but led to “a synthesis between their cultures and the Christian faith.”

In recent years there has been renewed interest in traditional indigenous religions, particularly in Andean and Central American countries; an Indian theology movement of indigenous Catholic theologians also has arisen.

In an apparent reference to more radical movements that promote a revival of indigenous religions, the pope warned that “the utopia of going back to breathe life into the pre-Columbian religions ... would be a step back.”

He underscored the “rich and profound popular religiousness” that grew out of the melding of indigenous and Christian beliefs and is one of the most obvious outward expressions of Catholicism in Latin America. He called that tradition a “precious treasure” that “must be protected, promoted and, when necessary, purified.”

In his criticisms, President Chavez called the death of native Americans after the European conquest “something much worse than the Holocaust in the Second World War.”

According to many historians, as many as 90 percent of the Americas' indigenous people died following the arrival of Europeans. The great majority of those people were killed by common European diseases, such as measles and typhus, against which the Americans had no natural resistance.

However, others were killed in by forced labor, massacres and in wars of conquest. On some Caribbean islands, not a single full-blooded native survived the European onslaught.

Invaders from Spain, Portugal and other Catholic nations often used the spreading of Catholicism as justification for their conquests. The popes endorsed the conquest of the Americas, even dividing the New World between Spain and Portugal.

However, some priests – including the famous Dominican Father Bartolome de las Casas – fought to protect the native Americans from murder and exploitation. Later, the papacy created rules to protect native Americans, although these were widely ignored.

In those parts of America conquered and settled by Protestant nations, the history was similar.

In 2002 President Chavez, who often refers to history in his speeches, changed the name of the traditional day celebrating the appearance of the Hispanic people after the European-American meeting to the Day of Indigenous Resistance.

He has emphasized expanding the rights of Venezuela's tiny and impoverished indigenous minority and has ordered foreign Protestant missionaries working in indigenous regions to leave the country.

The Chavez government also created a new post of minister for indigenous peoples. That minister, Nizia Maldonado, said the imposition of foreign beliefs had not ceased, citing the activities of "the missionaries who continue working in frontier regions."

President Chavez's comments followed friction over remarks by Pope Benedict in Brazil referring to a growing authoritarianism in the region's governments.

Although Pope Benedict did not name any specific nation or leader, one cardinal said

the remarks referred to President Chavez, and Venezuelan officials quickly denied that they did.