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Pope to India Prelates: Expect Suffering, Befriend Poor Anyway

Recalls That Christ Was Misunderstood and Despised

CASTEL GANDOLFO, Italy, SEPT. 19, 2011 ([Zenit.org](http://www.zenit.org)).- Befriending the poor of India will imply suffering, but Benedict XVI is encouraging the bishops, and their priests and religious, to be undeterred and continue to welcome everyone without distinction.

The Pope said this today when he addressed a group of prelates in Rome for their five-yearly "ad limina" visit. The bishops represented Agra, New Delhi and Bhopal, as well as the apostolic vicariate of Nepal.

The Holy Father acknowledged the challenges entailed in the missionary nature of the Church, but he told them: "You must always be prepared to spread the Kingdom of God and to walk in the footsteps of Christ, who was himself misunderstood, despised, falsely accused and who suffered for the sake of truth. Do not be deterred when such trials arise in your own ministry, and in that of your priests and religious."

The Church's service to the poor in India often brings accusations of proselytism. Church leaders explain, however, that the Christian witness of service, even to the "untouchables" of India's caste system, is what displeases the powerful in India.

The Pope reminded that faith in the Resurrection "gives us confidence and courage to face all that may come and to press forward, building the Kingdom of God."

Religious freedom

The Pontiff noted too the bishops' initiatives to commemorate Blessed John Paul II's visit to India 25 years ago, during which the Polish Pontiff "gave an authentic witness to the value of interreligious dialogue."

Benedict XVI cited his predecessor's emphasis on the right to worship God according to the dictates of conscience.

Christians are a small minority in India (2.3%), where the vast majority of the population is Hindu (80.5%) and a larger minority is Muslim (13.4%).

"Basic rights," the Pope recalled, are rights "shared by all humanity," and he encouraged the bishops to invite Christians and "followers of other religious traditions to take up the challenge of affirming the dignity of each and every human person. This dignity, expressed in respect for and promotion of the innate moral, spiritual and material rights of the person, is not merely a concession granted by any earthly authority. It is the gift of the Creator, and stems from the fact that we are created in his image and likeness."

The Holy Father concluded by expressing his prayer that "the followers of Christ in India will continue to be promoters of justice, bearers of peace, people of respectful dialogue, and lovers of the truth about God and about man." And he commended the bishops to "the intercession of Blessed Pope John Paul, who surely brings his affection for India before the throne of our heavenly Father."

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