



ZE12011905 - 2012-01-19

Permalink: <http://www.zenit.org/article-34152?l=english>

Pope Backs US Bishops' Concern About Religious Freedom

Calls for 'Articulate and Well-Formed' Laity Ready to Engage Culture

VATICAN CITY, JAN. 19, 2012 ([Zenit.org](http://www.zenit.org)).- Benedict XVI today joined his voice to that of the US bishops and warned of "certain attempts being made to limit that most cherished of American freedoms, the freedom of religion."

The Pope spoke with a group of bishops from Washington, D.C., and surrounding areas today, telling them that one of the most memorable elements of his 2008 trip to the United States was "the opportunity it afforded me to reflect on America's historical experience of religious freedom, and specifically the relationship between religion and culture."

"At the heart of every culture, whether perceived or not, is a consensus about the nature of reality and the moral good, and thus about the conditions for human flourishing," he said. "In America, that consensus, as enshrined in your nation's founding documents, was grounded in a worldview shaped not only by faith but a commitment to certain ethical principles deriving from nature and nature's God. Today that consensus has eroded significantly in the face of powerful new cultural currents which are not only directly opposed to core moral teachings of the Judeo-Christian tradition, but increasingly hostile to Christianity as such."

The Holy Father said that the Church in the U.S. "is called, in season and out of season, to proclaim a Gospel which not only proposes unchanging moral truths but proposes them precisely as the key to human happiness and social prospering."

"To the extent that some current cultural trends contain elements that would curtail the proclamation of these truths, whether constricting it within the limits of a merely scientific rationality, or suppressing it in the name of political power or majority rule, they represent a threat not just to Christian faith, but also to humanity itself and to the deepest truth about our being and ultimate vocation, our relationship to God."

The Pontiff referred to Blessed John Paul II's vision, saying that a culture that attempts to "suppress the dimension of ultimate mystery, and to close the doors to transcendent truth" "inevitably

becomes impoverished and falls prey [...] to reductionist and totalitarian readings of the human person and the nature of society."

Faith and reason

Benedict XVI said with the Church's long tradition of respect for the right relationship between faith and reason, it has a "critical role to play in countering cultural currents which, on the basis of an extreme individualism, seek to promote notions of freedom detached from moral truth."

"Our tradition does not speak from blind faith, but from a rational perspective which links our commitment to building an authentically just, humane and prosperous society to our ultimate assurance that the cosmos is possessed of an inner logic accessible to human reasoning," he clarified. "The Church's defense of a moral reasoning based on the natural law is grounded on her conviction that this law is not a threat to our freedom, but rather a 'language' which enables us to understand ourselves and the truth of our being, and so to shape a more just and humane world. She thus proposes her moral teaching as a message not of constraint but of liberation, and as the basis for building a secure future."

Benedict XVI explained, thus, that the Church's witness "is of its nature public: she seeks to convince by proposing rational arguments in the public square. The legitimate separation of Church and State cannot be taken to mean that the Church must be silent on certain issues, nor that the State may choose not to engage, or be engaged by, the voices of committed believers in determining the values which will shape the future of the nation."

Serious threats

The Bishop of Rome said it is "imperative that the entire Catholic community in the United States come to realize the grave threats to the Church's public moral witness presented by a radical secularism which finds increasing expression in the political and cultural spheres."

"Of particular concern," he continued, "are certain attempts being made to limit that most cherished of American freedoms, the freedom of religion."

The Pontiff noted concerns about the right of conscientious objection on the part of Catholic individuals and institutions with regard to cooperation in intrinsically evil practices; and a tendency to reduce religious freedom to mere freedom of worship without guarantees of respect for freedom of conscience.

"Here once more we see the need for an engaged, articulate and well-formed Catholic laity endowed with a strong critical sense vis-à-vis the dominant culture and with the courage to counter a reductive secularism which would delegitimize the Church's participation in public debate about the issues which are determining the future of American society," he said. "The preparation of committed lay leaders and the presentation of a convincing articulation of the Christian vision of man and society remain a primary task of the Church in your country; as essential components of the new evangelization, these concerns must shape the vision and goals of catechetical programs at every level."

Catholic politicians

Benedict XVI lauded the bishops' "efforts to maintain contacts with Catholics involved in political life and to help them understand their personal responsibility to offer public witness to their faith, especially with regard to the great moral issues of our time: respect for God's gift of life, the protection of human dignity and the promotion of authentic human rights."

"Respect for the just autonomy of the secular sphere must also take into consideration the truth that there is no realm of worldly affairs which can be withdrawn from the Creator and his dominion," he reminded. "There can be no doubt that a more consistent witness on the part of America's Catholics to their deepest convictions would make a major contribution to the renewal of society as a whole."

New generation

The Holy Father stated that anyone who looks realistically at the issues he described will see "the genuine difficulties which the Church encounters at the present moment."

"Yet," he continued, "in faith we can take heart from the growing awareness of the need to preserve a civil order clearly rooted in the Judeo-Christian tradition, as well as from the promise offered by a new generation of Catholics whose experience and convictions will have a decisive role in renewing the Church's presence and witness in American society. The hope which these 'signs of the times' give us is itself a reason to renew our efforts to mobilize the intellectual and moral resources of the entire Catholic community in the service of the evangelization of American culture and the building of the civilization of love."

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