NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Religion key to a 'healthy society,' pope tells secular Czechs

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Prague

tPope Benedict XVI began his three-day trip to the Czech Republic by marking the 20th anniversary of the 1989 Velvet Revolution, which swept what he called an ?oppressive regime? under the Communists from power, and urged Czechs to see religion as an essential ingredient of the new society they?re still trying to build twenty years later.

tIn effect, the pope?s ?pitch? was that Czechs should take a new look at Christianity, not as a fossil from their past but as a resource to building a more humane and satisfying future.

tThat may be a tall order in what is commonly reckoned to be one of the most secularized societies on earth, in which some 60 percent of Czechs profess no religious affiliation and in which, although baptized Catholics represent roughly a third of the population of 10 million, the number of practicing Catholics may be as low as two to three percent.

tAccording to Ted Turnau, a professor of religion at Prague?s Charles University, the Czech lands may be one of the few places on earth where the phrase ?Catholic atheist? is not a contradiction in terms.

tThat didn?t stop Benedict, however, from issuing a clear invitation for Czechs to remember their roots.

t?I call upon all the citizens of this Republic to rediscover the Christian traditions which have shaped their culture,? he said during an arrival ceremony at Prague?s Stará Ruzyn? airport. ?I invite the Christian community to continue to make its voice heard as the nation addresses the challenges of the new millennium.?

tThe pope began his remarks with a few brief words in Czech, drawing applause from the crowd gathered on the tarmac. He then switched to English, which he plans to use throughout the trip rather than German ? in part, a sign of sensitivity toward Czechs who still carry resentments for several centuries of German-speaking domination, first by the Austrian-Hungarian empire and then by the Nazis.

tChristianity, Benedict suggested, has a contribution to make in building a more humane society.

t?The truth of the Gospel is indispensable for a healthy society,? the pope said, ?since it opens us to hope and enables us to discover our inalienable dignity as God?s children.?

tThe pope ticked off a host of examples of Catholic luminaries who have made a contribution to Czech history, including Saints Cyril and Methodius in the ninth century, who laid the foundations for written Slavonic languages, to the Augustinian monk Gregor Mendel in the 19th century, a pioneer in modern genetics.

t?The authentic progress of humanity is best served by just such a combination of the wisdom of faith and the insights of reason,? the pope said.

t?May the Czech people always enjoy the benefits of that happy synthesis.?

tBenedict noted that during a half-century years of Communist rule, there was a ?ruthless attempt by the government of that time to silence the voice of the church.? He praised Christian martyrs, whose ?indomitable Christian witness ? kept the flame of faith alive in this country.?

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