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Pope delivers strong plea to resist secularism

by John L. Allen Jr.

NCR Today

By JOHN L. ALLEN JR.

Valletta, Malta

Pope Benedict XVI this morning delivered a strong appeal to Malta to resist secularizing currents during his homily at a large open-air Mass, staged in a public square called "the Granaries" because it was once used to protect Malta's food supply.

In effect, Benedict urged Malta to make its cultural exchange with Europe a two-way street, evangelizing the secular world rather than being evangelized by it.

"Not everything that today's world proposes is worthy of acceptance by the people of Malta," Benedict insisted.

"Many voices try to persuade us to put aside our faith in God and his Church, and to choose for ourselves the values and beliefs by which to live," the pope said. "They tell us we have no need of God or the Church."

Instead, the pope urged the Maltese to hold onto this conviction: "At every moment of our lives we depend entirely on God, in whom we live and move and have our being."

In the first place Benedict was making a spiritual point, but the argument also had clear cultural, social and even political resonance in terms of defending Christian principles.

Benedict summarized his appeal with a sound-bite to the Maltese, who were first evangelized by St. Paul following his famous shipwreck 1,950 years ago: "Preserve the faith and values transmitted to you by

your father the Apostle Saint Paul.?

The pope urged the Maltese to be careful about the cultural ideas they import.

?Remember that the exchange of goods between these islands and the world outside is a two-way process,? he said. ?What you receive, evaluate with care, and what you have that is of value, be sure to share with others.?

In a message that may carry special resonance in light of the sexual abuse crisis, the pope addressed a special word of solidarity to priests.

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?The mission entrusted to priests is truly a service to joy, to God?s joy which longs to break into the world,? Benedict said.

While Benedict did not allude to the sexual abuse crisis in his homily this morning, Archbishop Paul Cremona of Malta did so, albeit indirectly, in his remarks welcoming the pope.

Cremona said Catholics cannot cling to the model of church to which they have been accustomed, saying that "the church must be humble enough to recognize the failures and sins of its members."

[John Allen is NCR senior correspondent. His e-mail address is jallen@ncronline.org.]

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