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Pope lauds 'maternity of God' as counter-sign to egoism

John L. Allen Jr. | May. 13, 2010 NCR Today

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Fatima, Portugal

tIn the teeth of a world inclined to sacrifice unity ?on the altar of base egoisms of nation, race, ideology, the group and the individual,? Pope Benedict XVI today proposed Fatima as a counter-sign of the ?wondrous maternity of God.?

tThe comments came in the pontiff?s homily this morning for an open-air Mass in the world?s premier Marian shrine, before a vast and tightly-packed crowd estimated at half a million. Today is the feast of Our Lady of Fatima, recalling the reported apparitions of Mary to three shepherd children in this spot between May and October 1917.

tBenedict?s use of feminine imagery was striking, though in context the phrase ?maternity of God? appeared to refer to Mary?s role as the Mother of God. Benedict said that Mary testifies to the ?sweet joys? of God?s love for humanity.

tThe pope lauded the three young visionaries of Fatima, saying they had ?an experience of grace.? At the same time, the pontiff insisted that Christian faith does not depend upon such dramatic confirmation.

tGod, the pope said, ?has the power to reach us through the interior senses, so that the soul receives the gentle touch of a reality that lies beyond sensible things.? To perceive that invisible presence of God, Benedict said, requires ?an internal vigilance of the heart.?

tThat disposition to seek God?s ?gentle touch,? the pope said, is precisely what?s often missing in the modern world.

t?Who has the time to listen to God?s word and to be carried away his love?? the pope asked. ?Who stays vigilant, in the night of doubt and uncertainty, with a heart extended in prayer? Who awaits the dawn of a new day, keeping the flame of the faith alive??

tThe perennial need to rekindle those qualities, the pope said, means that the ?prophetic mission? of Fatima is never extinguished.

tNoting that the Fatima devotion began with just three young missionaries, the pope said that by now ?their example of life has spread and multiplied in countless groups over the entire surface of the earth.?

tBenedict also noted that in 2017, seven years from now, Fatima will celebrate the 100th anniversary of the 1917 visions. Those experiences unfolded against the backdrop of the upheaval and persecutions unleashed by the overthrow of the monarchy in Portugal in 1910 and the birth of a secular republic.

In the decades since, Fatima has become one of the most popular Marian shrines in the world. It?s also

associated with a series of revelations from Mary reported by the seers of Fatima, which included a vision of Hell, of future wars, and of a bishop in white attacked by bullets and arrows ? that last vision popularly interpreted as a reference to the 1981 assassination attempt against Pope John Paul II, which took place on the feast of Our Lady of Fatima in May 1981.

tBenedict invoked one element of the Fatima visions at the conclusion of his homily this morning, praying that the seven years between now and the 100th anniversary of the apparitions in 2017 will hasten ?the pre-announced triumph of the Immaculate Heart of Mary to the glory of the Most Holy Trinity.?

The young seers of Fatima reported that Mary had told them to promote devotion to her Immaculate Heart throughout the world, and that in the end the Immaculate Heart would triumph and usher in an age of peace.

The legacy of Fatima has had powerful echoes in American Catholicism. A Catholic association in the United States, the Association for the Arch of Triumph of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, today announced plans to raise between $85 and $100 million to build a 700-foot monument in Buffalo, New York, dedicated to the Immaculate Heart. Plans call for the structure to be 700 feet tall, which organizers say would make it the tallest monument in the world.

Beyond the reference to Fatima, organizers also intend the monument as a "pro-life shrine," meaning a rallying point for opposition to abortion and the defense of human life from conception to natural death.

tSo far, the pope has drawn large and enthusiastic crowds in Fatima. Hundreds of thousands gathered yesterday to watch the pope pray before the statue of the Madonna of Fatima and to recite the rosary in the square facing the large basilica here. The crowd also took part in a torchlight vigil last night, repeatedly crying ?Viva o Papa? and cheering the pope?s presence.

tThe Mass this morning drew a throng despite chilly and rainy weather in the early morning hours in Fatima, though by the time the pope arrived at mid-morning the sun was shining.

As part of the entrance procession, the small statue of Our Lady of Fatima with the bullet doctors removed from John Paul II set in its crown was carried on a bed of flowers to be set on the altar where the pope celebrated Mass. During the process, the crowd repeatedly sang ?Ave Maria.?

tThe 83-year-old pontiff has seemed in good form thus far into the trip, despite being slightly hoarse at one point yesterday. Later this afternoon, Benedict will visit a social center operated by the Catholic church and then speak at a meeting of Portugal?s bishops.

So far Benedict's trip has drawn largely positive coverage in the local press, which has focused in particular on the large crowds which have greeted the pontiff. Particularly in the context of the sexual abuse crisis which has swirled around the Vatican and the papacy in recent weeks, the enthusiastic reception has been striking.

tAside from the large Portuguese turnout, there?s also a considerable international presence in Fatima this week. Pilgrims from various nations formed part of the opening procession for the papal Mass.

Cardinals Antonio Rouco Varela of Madrid and Llu's Mart'nez Sistach of Barcelona are in Fatima, as is Cardinal Joseph Zen, the emeritus bishop of Honk Kong. Also on hand is Cardinal Sean O?Malley of Boston, who spent time in Portugal as a young Capuchin friar and who has long been engaged in pastoral outreach to Portuguese-speaking Catholics in the United States and elsewhere.

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