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It's dialogue or death, pope says in Portugal

by John L. Allen Jr.

NCR Today

By JOHN L. ALLEN JR.

Porto, Portugal

In a strong missionary appeal coupled with a call for dialogue, Pope Benedict XVI today urged his flock to resist the lure of a sort of "ghetto Catholicism," closed in on itself.

"We have to overcome the temptation to limit ourselves to what we already have, or think we have, that's securely ours," the pope said.

"That would be a slow death."

Benedict XVI made those comments during an open-air Mass in Porto, an urban area of roughly two million in northern Portugal.

Benedict seemed almost impatient to get things moving, saying that Christ's comforting words about being with the church to the end of time "do not excuse us from going out to meet others."

"How much time has been lost, how much work has been delayed, because of carelessness on this point!" he said.

As he has throughout his four-day trip, Benedict stressed the need for dialogue with those outside the Catholic fold.

"Today the church is called to face new challenges, and is ready to dialogue with different religions and cultures, seeking to construct the peaceful co-existence of peoples with every person of good will."

tBenedict also suggested that the style of missionary effort called for can be expressed in the following phrase: "We impose nothing, but we always propose."

tBenedict insisted that humanity wants to know the secret of Christian hope, even if they're not aware of wanting it.

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t"Everyone, at the end, asks us, even if they seem not to be asking us," he said. "From our personal and communal experience, we know that Jesus is the one whom all are awaiting."

tOffering Christ as the key to human life, the pope argued, represents Christianity's primary contribution to the great social challenges of the 21st century.

t"Facing the enormous problems of development of peoples that almost drives us to despair and surrender," he said, "Christians know that the only firm basis upon which to build a better future is the promise of Christ."

tDespite chilly and rainy weather this morning, an estimated 200,000 people flocked to Pope Benedict's Mass in the Grand Piazza of Avenida dos Aliados of Porto. The tightly-packed crowd filled the square and flowed down adjacent streets. Assistance was offered by young volunteers clad in orange t-shirts reading "Papa Team."

tPorto is Portugal's second city, and has at least two main claims to fame. First, it's famous as the namesake of Port wine, which is stored and aged in caves in the Vila Nova de Gaia neighborhood. Second, it's also known as the "unbeaten city" because it has never been conquered since its creation during the Roman Empire. It withstood assaults, for example, both by the Moors and the armies of Napoleon.

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tOne interesting footnote to today's events: In general, gifts presented to popes when they travel are fairly conventional, often a painting, a book, a piece of decorated porcelain, or some religious icon. Here, however, the Catholic University of Porto presented the pope with a decidedly more high-tech keepsake - a "VitalJacket," which is a sort of electronic t-shirt that monitors the wearer's heart rate.

tPress materials distributed in tandem with the visit asserted that the "VitalJacket" provides vital medical security "in complete comfort." Data on the heart rate is fed to a small hardware box carried in the wearer's pocket.

tLocal universities were actually on something of a roll with respect to papal gifts. The public Porto University gave Benedict XVI a guitar made of carbon paper, described as ultra-light and resistant to weather conditions. It uses technologies heretofore employed only by the aerospace industry.

tFor the record, there was no word as to whether Benedict intended to don his "VitalJacket" or pluck his space-age guitar on the return trip to Rome.

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tIf one were to hand out a prize for the most visible Catholic movement throughout Pope Benedict's four-day trip to Portugal, it would almost certainly go to the Neocatechumenal Way. Founded in Madrid in

1964 by Spanish laypersons Kiko Arguello and Carmen Hernandez, the movement claims some 1 million followers around the world.

The Neocatechumenate has been embraced by many church leaders around the world for its ability to stir passion among converts to the faith, especially among the young, and for its effective pastoral work with Latino/a Catholics. It has also been a lightning rod, however, for its distinctive liturgical practices, and for the movement's allegedly divisive impact on some of the parishes and dioceses where it's present.

Neocatechumenate banners have dotted the crowds at Benedict's Masses, and it's been hard to move around the margins of papal events without encountering small groups of Neocatechumenate members singing and celebrating.

That's not because the Neocatechumenate is unusually prominent in Portugal, but rather because the movement is staging a massive "European Youth Vocational Meeting" in Fatima today, piggy-backing on the papal trip to attract Catholic youth from across the continent. The rally is being held in the piazza facing the main shrine in Fatima, the same space where Benedict XVI yesterday celebrated an open-air Mass.

Though Neocatechumenate members were not on hand yesterday evening to hear Benedict XVI address the bishops of Portugal, his message would be of keen interest to them and to other "new movements" in the church.

In his address, the pope praised the flowering of new lay movements and religious orders, which he said have grown up precisely in a moment in which many refer to a "winter of the church."

At the same time, Benedict insisted that new movements and communities have to accept the "common faith of the church," work in collaboration with other Catholic groups and institutions, and accept the authority of their pastors and bishops.

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