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Pope calls on religions to defend environment, human life

John L. Allen Jr. | Sep. 17, 2010 NCR Today

LONDON -- A great irony of Pope Benedict XVI?s approach to relations with other religions is that this theologian-pope has to some extent dethroned theology, in favor of what he calls ?inter-cultural? dialogue. By that, he means focusing on social, cultural and political concerns where the religions agree, rather than on matters of doctrine where they don?t.

That theme surfaced again this morning, as Benedict XVI met a delegation of leaders of other religions gathered at St. Mary?s University in the Twickenham neighborhood of London, where the pope had earlier participated in an assembly of Catholic educators and schoolchildren.

Despite their differences, Benedict said, the various religions witness to the spiritual side of human life, which can inspire what he called ?noble and generous action, to the benefit of the entire human family.?

In terms of specifics, Benedict pointed to ?concrete forms of collaboration? such as ?promoting integral human development [and] working for peace, justice and the stewardship of creation.? On that last point, Benedict argued that religious convictions can help humanity not ?disfigure the beauty of creation by exploiting it for selfish purposes.?

Benedict also pointed to the ?defense of human life at every stage,? as well as ?how to ensure the non-exclusion of the religious dimension of individuals and communities in the life of society.?

Echoing a point that has long been a deep Vatican concern, Benedict said that one condition of dialogue among religions is "freedom to practice one's religion and to engage in acts of public worship, and the freedom to follow one's conscience without suffering ostracism or persecution, even after conversion from one religion to another."

In recent years the Vatican has made what it calls "reciprocity," which is another term for religious freedom, a top diplomatic and inter-religious priority. The pope's reference to conversion is likely an indirect reference to the experience of some majority Muslim states, where conversion from Islam is treated as a criminal offense.

On a more philosophical level, Benedict called on religious believers to remain in dialogue with the human and natural sciences, reminding them that ?the quest for the sacred does not devalue other fields of human enquiry.?

?These disciplines do not and cannot answer the fundamental question, because they operate on another level altogether,? the pope said. ?They cannot satisfy the deepest longings of the human heart, they cannot fully explain to us our origin and our destiny, why and for what purpose we exist, nor indeed can they provide us with an exhaustive answer to the question, ?Why is there something rather than nothing???

Later this afternoon, Benedict XVI will visit the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, at Lambeth Palace. He?s also scheduled to deliver a major address on faith and politics to leaders in British society gathered in Westminster Hall, the site where St. Thomas More was tried and condemned in 1535 for refusing to

acknowledge King Henry VIII as head of the church in England.

[John L. Allen, Jr. is *NCR* senior correspondent.]

John Allen will be filing reports throughout the Papal visit to the U.K. Sept. 16-19. Stay tuned to NCR Today[1] for updates.

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All this week in his Distinctly Catholic blog, Michael Sean Winters is interviewing a variety of Newman scholars:

- Fr. Joseph Komonchak, taught ecclesiology at Catholic University, wrote his dissertation on Newman [21]
- Christopher Pramuk, Assistant professor of Theology at Xavier University in Cincinnati [22]
- Ian Ker, Professor at Oxford University and author of a Newman biography [23]
- The Very Reverend Richard Duffield, the Provost of the Birmingham Oratory [24]
- Archbishop Vincent Nichols, the Archbishop of Westminster and Primate of England [25]

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