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

Pope rips anti-Christian tide in major foreign policy speech

John L. Allen Jr. | Jan. 10, 2011 NCR Today

ANALYSIS

Pope Benedict XVI today devoted his most closely watched annual foreign policy address to religious freedom, especially what many observers see as a rising global tide of anti-Christian hostility. He denounced assaults on Christians in Iraq, Egypt, Nigeria, Pakistan and China, as well as a growing ?marginalization? of Christianity in secular Europe.

While this was hardly the first time a pope has lauded religious freedom, Benedict?s defense of beleaguered Christians was unusually focused ? reflecting a growing conviction in the Vatican that anti-Christian persecution around the world, sometimes referred to as ?Christianophobia,? is taking on epidemic proportions.

How much difference Benedict?s language will make on the ground remains to be seen, but it does clearly confirm that religious freedom, and especially the defense of embattled Christians, has become the Vatican?s supreme diplomatic priority.

?Acts of discrimination against Christians,? the pontiff complained, frequently ?are considered less grave and less worthy of attention on the part of governments and public opinion.?

The remarks came in Benedict?s annual address to the diplomatic corps accredited to the Holy See, considered the pope?s most important foreign policy speech of the year. The Holy See currently has diplomatic relations with 178 nations and the European Union, as well as special observer status at the United Nations.

In years past, popes have typically used the speech to diplomats as a sort of foreign policy panorama, surveying major global concerns such as economic justice, war and peace, the environment, and equity in diplomatic relations. This year, however, Benedict XVI was focused like a laser beam on religious freedom, and in particular with attacks on Christians.

Benedict began by citing the plight of Christians in Iraq, where two-thirds of what was once the Middle East?s second-largest Christian population has vanished since the first Gulf War in 1991, and Egypt.

?Need we repeat it?? the pope asked rhetorically. ?Christians are original and authentic citizens? in the Middle East, Benedict said, quoting the concluding message from the recent Synod of Bishops for the Middle East, who should ?enjoy all the rights of freedom of conscience, freedom of worship and freedom of education, teaching and the use of the mass media.?

Benedict pointedly added that it?s not enough to guarantee freedom of worship. Bishops in the region frequently say that while Islamic states generally allow Christians to celebrate religious rituals, they do not respect freedom of conscience ? for instance, the right of a Muslim to convert to Christianity without legal fallout. Further, they say, Christians are often discriminated against in housing, employment, and civic life.

Benedict also said he hopes the church will be able to establish ?suitable pastoral structures? on the Arabian Peninsula to serve immigrant Christian populations.

(At the Synod of Bishops for the Middle East, participants said that fully half the Christians of the region today are not traditional Arab faithful, but ?guest workers,? mostly migrants from Asia and Africa. Saudi Arabia now contains the second largest Catholic community in the Middle East, with what the Vatican estimates at 1.25 million believers, though the country does not permit public expression of any non-Islamic faith.)

While popes typically offer broad moral principles in their foreign policy addresses rather than specific legislative recommendations, Benedict bluntly demanded that the anti-blasphemy law in Pakistan, which the country's small Christianity minority says is used as a tool of intimidation and persecution.

Last July, two Christian brothers accused under the law of writing a blasphemous letter against Muhammad, the founder of Islam, were gunned down outside a Pakistani court. In 2005, another Christian accused of blasphemy was beaten to death in a prison hospital by a guard wielding a hammer.

In November, a Christian mother of four was sentenced to death under the law, a case that has sparked wide international protest. In early December, a pro-Taliban Pakistani cleric offered a reward of $5,800 to anyone who kills the woman in prison, angered by attempts of the local governor to save her life.

Benedict also noted that in other parts of the world, ?philosophical and political systems call for strict control, if not a monopoly, of the state over society? ? specifically mentioning China and Cuba, both places where the Catholic church has a troubled relationship with an officially Marxist government.

In the West, meanwhile, Benedict warned against what he described as a growing tendency to ?marginalize? Christianity. In particular, he cited a case currently on appeal before the European Court of Human Rights which would require Italy to remove crucifixes from its public school classrooms.

The pope also insisted on upholding the ?right to conscientious objection? on the part of Christian health care workers and legal professionals.

Benedict concluded by asserting that the ?path leading to authentic and lasting peace? necessarily ?passes through respect for the right to religious freedom in all its fullness.?

For those foreign ministries around the world (including, of course, the U.S. State Department) seeking to understand the diplomatic priorities of the Holy See in the New Year, Pope Benedict?s speech this morning seems to provide a clear one-word reply: ?Christianophobia.?

Taking that concern seriously, it would seem, is the price of admission to collaboration with the Holy See on anything else.

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