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Pope tells U.S. bishops to build church unity

by Francis X. Rocca by Catholic News Service

VATICAN CITY -- Pope Benedict XVI urged American Catholics to strive for greater unity, especially among ethnic groups and between bishops and religious orders, in order to carry out the church's mission in an increasingly hostile society.

The pope made his remarks May 18 in a speech to U.S. bishops from the Chaldean, Ruthenian, Maronite, Ukrainian, Armenian, Melkite, Syriac and Romanian Catholic churches, who were making their periodic "ad limina" visits to the Vatican.

They were the last of 15 groups of U.S. bishops to make to make "ad limina" visits since November 2011, reporting on the status of their dioceses to Pope Benedict and holding discussions with Vatican officials.

In his speech, Pope Benedict called for greater "Catholic unity" to counter the "forces of disaggregation within the church which increasingly represent a grave obstacle to her mission in the United States."

The pope echoed his earlier warnings to other U.S. bishops about the dangers of secularization and state curbs on religious freedom.

"With the progressive weakening of traditional Christian values, and the threat of a season in which our fidelity to the Gospel may cost us dearly, the truth of Christ needs not only to be understood, articulated and defended, but to be proposed joyfully and confidently as the key to authentic human fulfillment and to the welfare of society as a whole," he said.

Pope Benedict noted efforts by various lay movements in the U.S. to encourage Catholics "to move forward together, speaking with one voice in addressing the urgent problems of the present moment."

He also encouraged bishops to strengthen their "communication and cooperation" with religious orders.

"The urgent need in our time for credible and attractive witnesses to the redemptive and transformative power of the Gospel makes it essential to recapture a sense of the sublime dignity and beauty of the consecrated life," he said.

In an apparent reference to two recent investigations of American women religious, Pope Benedict thanked "many consecrated women in your country" for their "example of fidelity and self-sacrifice," and said he prayed that "this moment of discernment will bear abundant spiritual fruit for the revitalization and strengthening of their communities in fidelity to Christ and the church, as well as to their founding charisms."

In April, the Vatican announced that it had discovered "serious doctrinal problems" in the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, and appointed Archbishop J. Peter Sartain of Seattle to lead a major reform of the group, whose members represent about 80 percent of America's 57,000 religious women.

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U.S. religious women are also awaiting results of an apostolic visitation of their communities, ordered by the Congregation for Religious in 2008, in light of the steep decline in numbers of American women in consecrated life. The visitation's final report was submitted in December but has not been made public.

In his speech to the bishops, Pope Benedict noted the large proportion of immigrants among American Catholics, and celebrated them as a resource for evangelization, saying that the "immense promise and the vibrant energies of a new generation of Catholics are waiting to be tapped for the renewal of the church's life and the rebuilding of the fabric of American society."

But he cautioned that the ethnic diversity which immigration brings also poses the "demanding pastoral task of fostering a communion of cultures" within the church. That task requires a respect for linguistic differences and the provision of social services, the pope said, but also preaching and teaching "aimed at inspiring in all the faithful a deeper sense of their communion" in the faith and their responsibility for the church's mission.

Pope Benedict also praised the U.S. bishops' "long-standing commitment ... to immigration reform," as part of an effort to ensure the "just treatment and the defense of the human dignity of immigrants."

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