

Pope Leaves Brazil Scolding Neo-Liberalism and Marxism

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Pope Benedict XVI ended Sunday, May 13, his five day visit to Brazil with a strong speech to Latin American cardinals and bishops criticizing "authoritarian governments" and condemning the growing gap between rich and poor in the region.

Speaking at the opening session in Aparecida, southwest of São Paulo, of a meeting of Latin American and Caribbean bishops that will set directions for the region for the next decade, the pope said the faith "has serious challenges to address, because the harmonious development of society and the Catholic identity of (the region's) peoples are in jeopardy."

Looking back at the more than 500 years since Catholic missionaries first arrived in the Americas, the pontiff said early evangelization was not "the imposition of a foreign culture" on the region's indigenous peoples, but led to "a synthesis between their cultures and the Christian faith."

In an apparent reference to radical movements that promote a revival of indigenous religions, the pope warned that "the utopia of going back to breathe life into the pre-Columbus religions ... would be a step back."

He underscored the "rich and profound popular religiousness" that grew out of the melding of indigenous and Christian beliefs and is one of the most obvious outward expressions of Catholicism in Latin America. He called that tradition a "precious treasure" that "must be protected, promoted and, when necessary, purified."

Describing the social situation that the bishops must address, he said globalization brings people together, but is accompanied by "the risk of vast monopolies and of treating profit as the supreme value."

The pope noted weaknesses in both political responses to the region's challenges and the response by church communities.

In the political realm, he criticized both Marxist-inspired governments and those that have implemented neo-liberal economic policies. Saying "there has been notable progress toward democracy," he expressed concern about "authoritarian forms of government and regimes wedded to certain ideologies that we thought had been superseded".

At the same time, he noted that in countries with liberal economies, "increasing sectors of society" are "oppressed by immense poverty or even despoiled of their own natural resources."

While praising the efforts of catechists and lay movements and the church's educational and charitable works, the pontiff said there has been "a certain weakening of Christian life in society overall" and in the church "due to secularism, hedonism, indifferentism and proselytism by numerous sects, animist religions and new pseudo-religious phenomena."

Focusing on the region's "urgent social and political problems" and the "challenge of poverty and destitution," the pope said that "just structures are ... an indispensable condition for a just society" but, while both Marxism and Western-style capitalism promised such structures, neither has delivered.

Marxism, he said, has left "a sad heritage of economic and ecological destruction" and "a painful destruction of the human spirit," while in the West "the distance between rich and poor is growing constantly and giving rise to a worrying degradation of personal dignity through drugs, alcohol and deceptive illusions of happiness."

Just structures and the values underlying them "do not arise from ideologies or from their premises," but depend on consensus, the pope said.

While saying the church must contribute to that task, he warned against direct church involvement in politics.

"The church is the advocate of justice and of the poor precisely because it does not identify with politicians or with partisan interests," he said. Instead, the church's role is to teach "values, guide consciences and offer a life choice that goes beyond the political sphere," he said.

Lay Catholics, meanwhile, have as "their responsibility and their mission" the task of bringing "the light of the Gospel into public life, into culture, economics and politics."

At the end of his speech, the pope briefly addressed certain groups within the church - families, priests, religious and consecrated lay people, the laity in general and youth.

In a region in which youth make up the majority of the population, the pope said that young people "are not afraid of sacrifice, but of a meaningless life." He called for them to oppose "the facile illusions of instant happiness" and "every form of violence," but offered no guidance on how to keep young people in the church.

While 71% of Latin Americans consider themselves Catholic, according to a survey by the Latinobarómetro polling firm in 2005, when the pope was elected, the figure was highest - 76% - among people over age 60, and only 66% among those between ages 16 and 25.

Latin America is home to 43% of the world's Catholics but has about 7,000 lay people per priest, the highest ratio in the world.

The Fifth General Conference of Bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean brings together 266 church people from throughout the hemisphere; of those, 162 are bishops with voice and vote. The pope chose the theme of discipleship and mission, and the meeting is expected to end with a call for a renewed missionary effort in the church in the region.

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