POPE THANKS SUDAN'S BISHOPS FOR PEACE EFFORTS

Encourages Church to Engage in Dialogue with Muslims

VATICAN CITY, MARCH 15, 2010 (Zenit.org).- One of the needed ingredients to consolidating peace in Sudan is interreligious dialogue that fosters respect and understanding, especially with Muslims, says Benedict XVI.

The Pope said this Saturday when he received in audience the bishops, who are in Rome for their five-yearly "ad limina" visit. He praised and thanked the bishops for their work in the conflict that has scourged the country for decades.

He also pointed out the necessary elements to attain and consolidate peace: political life that is morally correct, education to overcome ethnic differences, and interreligious dialogue that fosters respect and understanding.

The Holy Father first expressed his appreciation for the Church's efforts for reconciliation in the country, to which it has been committed for years.

He valued especially the declaration "For a Just and Lasting Peace," issued by the Sudanese episcopal conference on Sept. 3, 2002, in which the bishops rejected unanimously "any return to war."

The Pontiff stated: "As heralds of the Gospel, you have tried to inculcate in your people and in society a sense of responsibility toward the present and future generations, fostering forgiveness, mutual acceptance and respect for the commitments assumed.

"You have also worked to advance fundamental human rights through the reign of law and have called for the implementation of an integral model of economic and human development."

The Pontiff also thanked the bishops for "all the Church in your country is doing to help the poor live in dignity and self-esteem, to help them find long-term work, to enable them to make their own contribution to society."

Deep roots

Benedict XVI pointed out that "for peace to have deep roots, concrete efforts must be made to diminish the factors that contribute to conflicts, in particular, corruption, ethnic tensions, indifference and egoism."

"The initiatives in this connection will undoubtedly be beneficial if they are based on integrity, on a sense of universal fraternity and on the virtues of justice, responsibility and charity," he said. Peace treaties, he added, "will only bear fruit if they are inspired and accompanied by the exercise of mature and morally correct leadership."

He also insisted on the importance of the moral education of future social and political leaders, and, in this regard, he encouraged the bishops to "reinforce Catholic education, thus preparing the laity, in particular, to give convincing witness of Christ in all aspects of family, social and political life."

Another aspect he stressed is the need for interreligious dialogue, especially with Muslims.

The Pope expressed his gratitude for the efforts carried out by the Sudanese bishops "to maintain good relations with the followers of Islam," and encouraged them to find in Muslims "cooperation in practical initiatives."

"I would encourage you to emphasize the values that Christians have in common with Muslims as basis for the 'dialogue of life,' which is a first essential step toward genuine respect and understanding between religions," he stressed.

"The same openness and love must be shown to persons belonging to traditional religions," he added.

Benedict XVI also noted the importance of the bishops' own witness as pastors, exercising authority not "as something impersonal or bureaucratic, precisely because it is an authority born of witness."

"You yourselves must be the first teachers and witnesses of our communion in the faith and love of Christ," he said, "participating in joint initiatives, listening to your collaborators, helping priests religious and faithful to accept and help one another as brothers and sisters, without distinctions of race or ethnic group, in an exchange of gifts."

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