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Pope's Pro-Colonization Comment Stirs Heavy Criticism in Brazil

by LADB Staff
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Pope Benedict XVI set off widespread outrage during an official visit to Brazil in mid-May when he said that the Roman Catholic Church purified indigenous people of the Americas and that an effort to revive local religions would be a step backward. Criticism of his comments ultimately led Benedict to make a partial retraction or revision of his statements.

Numerous indigenous and even religious groups attacked the pope's claim that seemed to justify historical genocide.

'Arrogant and disrespectful'
Outraged Indian leaders in Brazil said on May 14 they were offended by Pope Benedict's "arrogant and disrespectful" comments. In a speech to Latin American and Caribbean bishops at the end of a visit to Brazil, the Pope said the Church had not imposed itself on the indigenous peoples of the Americas. They had welcomed the arrival of European priests at the time of the conquest as they were "silently longing" for Christianity, seeking Christ without realizing it, he said.

Benedict said that his visit to Brazil, his first papal voyage to Latin America, "embraced not only that great nation, but all Latin America, home to many of the world's Catholics." He described the trip as being "above all, a pilgrimage of praise to God for the faith that has shaped their cultures for over 500 years."

The pope in Brazil told the bishops that "the proclamation of Jesus and of his Gospel did not at any point involve an alienation of the pre-Columbus cultures, nor was it the imposition of a foreign culture." Millions of tribal Indians are believed to have died as a result of European colonization backed by the church after Columbus landed in the Americas in 1492, through slaughter, disease or enslavement. Priests blessed conquistadors as they waged war on the indigenous peoples, although some later defended them, and many today are the most vociferous allies of Indians.

Many Indians today struggle for survival, stripped of their traditional ways of life and excluded from society. Marcio Meira, in charge of Brazil's federal Indian Bureau, said Indians were forced to convert to Catholicism as the result of a "colonial process."

Pope Benedict's comments came under intense criticism from Latin American leaders, including Venezuela's President Hugo Chavez, who accused him of ignoring a holocaust. "It's arrogant and disrespectful to consider our cultural heritage secondary to theirs," said Jecinaldo Satere Mawe, chief coordinator of the Amazon Indian group Coordenacao das Nacoes Indigenas da Amazonia Brasileira (COIAB).
Several Indian groups sent a letter to the pope asking for his support in defending their ancestral lands and culture. They said the Indians had suffered a "process of genocide" since the first European colonizers had arrived. "The state used the church to do the dirty work in colonizing the Indians, but they already asked forgiveness for that...so is the pope taking back the church's word?" said Dionito Jose de Souza, a leader of the Makuxi tribe in northern Roraima state.

Pope John Paul spoke in 1992 of mistakes in the evangelization of native peoples of the Americas. In 2000, during the Vatican's Holy Year, the church apologized to Brazil's Indians and blacks during a ceremony in Brazil for the "sins and errors" committed by its clergy and faithful in the past 500 years.

A cardinal representing Pope John Paul II participated in the ceremony, which saw the head of Brazil's Bishops Conference (Conferencia Nacional dos Bisbos do Brasil(CNBB) ask God for forgiveness for the sins committed against people, especially the Indians.

Pope Benedict not only upset many Indians but also Catholic priests who have joined their struggle, said Sandro Tuxa, who heads the movement of northeastern tribes. "We repudiate the pope's comments," Tuxa said. "To say the cultural decimation of our people represents a purification is offensive, and frankly, frightening....I think (the pope) has been poorly advised."

Even the Catholic Church's Indian advocacy group in Brazil, the Conselho Indigenista Missionario (CIMI), distanced itself from the pope. "The pope doesn't understand the reality of the Indians here, his statement was wrong and indefensible," CIMI advisor Father Paulo Suess told Reuters. "I, too, was upset."

Non-apology, but acknowledgement of injustices a week later
On May 23, the pope said he acknowledged that injustices were committed during the colonization of Latin America. "The memories of a glorious past cannot ignore the shadows that accompanied the process of evangelization of the Latin American continent. It is not possible, in fact, to forget the suffering and injustices that were inflicted on the indigenous peoples, when often their fundamental human rights were trampled upon," he said.

"While we do not overlook the various injustices and sufferings which accompanied colonization, the Gospel has expressed and continues to express the identity of the peoples in this region and provides inspiration to address the challenges of our globalized era," Benedict told English-speaking pilgrims in St. Peter's Square as he talked about his trip to Brazil.

The pontiff said he was making a "dutiful mention of such unjustifiable crimes" and said some missionaries and theologians in the past had condemned them. His stronger critics portrayed the statement as a non-apology, similar to others he has made after antagonizing other non-Catholic religious groups.

Prior statements by the pope and statements from his years as a cardinal have created anger among Muslims (as when he quoted a 14th-Century Byzantine emperor's insult against the Prophet
Mohammed), Buddhists (calling Buddhism "auto-erotic spirituality" that offered "transcendence without imposing concrete religious obligations"), and Jews (failing to bring up anti-Semitism during a long speech at Auschwitz or apologizing on behalf of his home country Germany or for church complicity in the Holocaust).

In the past year, the idea of the purifying power of evangelization for savage indigenous Americans got widespread play when a controversial film depicted the Mayan civilization as brutal, oppressive, and in need of Christian redemption. Actor-director Mel Gibson premiered his film Apocalypto in late 2006 and early 2007, which scholars accused of having many historical inaccuracies.

Critics argued that it concluded with the suggestion that Spanish missionaries came to save the Mayan people from themselves and completely neglected the devastating effects of European genocide in the Americas (see NotiCen, 2007-01-25). The film broke box-office records in Mexico. Gibson is a globally-prominent, ultraconservative Catholic figure.

**Catholic numbers in Brazil face long-term decline**

Benedict's visit to Brazil came as the percentage of Brazilians who identify themselves as Catholic has been slowly declining. Analysts typically point to the social conservatism of the Catholic Church as driving Brazilians away, along with the relatively small number of priests in the country of 190 million people.

Catholics make up 74% of Brazil's population, down from 84% in 1991, according to government figures. That number was about 89% in 1980. Membership in Protestant denominations, including Pentecostal churches, increased to 15%, from 6% in 1991. The pope dedicated only a small portion of his Brazil remarks to the shortage of priests in Latin America, a problem that church officials there consider especially acute.

Priests are outnumbered by evangelical Protestant preachers 2 to 1, and vast swaths of the huge country are without priests. Pope Benedict ended his first pilgrimage to the Americas much as he began it: with a searing attack on diverse forces, from Marxism and capitalism to birth control, that he believes threaten society and the Roman Catholic faith. Turnout at his final mass, held at Brazil's most popular religious shrine on May 14, was notably low, underscoring the very problem the pope came to address a Catholic Church in decline.

"One can detect a certain weakening of Christian life in society overall and of participation in the life of the Catholic Church," Benedict said. The open-air celebration took place at the sanctuary of Nossa Senhora Aparecida, a shrine to a black Virgin Mary who is Brazil's patron saint, in the town of Aparecida between Sao Paulo and Rio de Janeiro.

The pope lauded "progress toward democracy" in the region but expressed concern about "authoritarian forms of government and regimes wedded to certain ideologies that we thought had been superseded." The Latin American media widely saw the remark as a jab at leftist Venezuelan President Chavez, who has frequently clashed with the church hierarchy and called Christ "the greatest socialist in history."
The trip also was seen as a test for a pope often considered Eurocentric and aloof to the more populous bases of his far-flung church. During Benedict's five days in Brazil, many watching him saw and heard not so much an embracing and accessible pontiff as the man he was before becoming pope: the dogmatic Joseph Ratzinger, a professorial theologian dedicated to guarding and purifying the faith. He stuck studiously to the fundamental message of his papacy, that unwavering love of God must form the basis of any endeavor. His exhortations to protect family life and return to the church will resonate with numerous Latin Americans who are dismayed at the erosion of tradition in the heavily Roman Catholic continent.

But for many Latin Americans, Benedict remained a distant pope, his instructions unrealistic. "We are not used to him yet," said Ana Cortes, 42, from Monte Patria, Chile, who came to see the pope and preserved fond memories of Benedict's charismatic predecessor, John Paul II. "We see him as far away still, but I think in time his words will reach us." "I don't think many people are listening to him," said her friend, Nilse Barraza, 47. Augusto Dellava, 17, who came to the mass from Montevideo, Uruguay, said good Christians should be able to relate to the pope. "He talks a lot about youths. We are the future of the church," he said. "He demands a lot from us. It's not easy, but it's worth it."

The 80-year-old pope did not focus much on poverty during this trip, nor did he orchestrate any of the grand gestures that endeared John Paul to his followers. When John Paul visited Brazil in 1980, he gave his gold papal ring to the residents of a Rio de Janeiro slum he visited. Benedict did not go to a slum nor did he meet with poor people, save for the briefest of encounters outside the Sao Paulo cathedral.

Speaking to the bishops, he said the "preferential option for the poor" was implicit in faith in Christ, adding that the people of the region "have the right to a full life, proper to the children of God, under conditions that are more human" and free from hunger and violence. The pope blamed both capitalism and Marxism for removing God from life and dehumanizing society. The pope's views on Marxism are well-known, but his inclusion of capitalism in the same critique was something of a surprise.

On the fringes of the May 13 mass, a group of 25 theology students from a Brazilian university marched with pictures of "martyrs" who had not figured prominently in any of the pope's utterances. These included Archbishop Oscar Romero of San Salvador, who was slain while celebrating mass in 1980, and Dorothy Stang, a US-born nun who was killed in Brazil two years ago defending indigenous rights against loggers (see NotiSur, 2007-05-27).

The students' banner declared they were the "church of the option for the poor and the excluded." "There is this real disconnect between what the pope says and the reality among Catholics in Brazil," said David Fleischer, a political scientist at the Universidade de Brasilia.

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