

Pope sings for peace at site of Muslim-Christian clashes

Nazareth, Israel, May 14, 2009 / 10:41 am (CNA).- Muslims, Christians, Jewish and Druze leaders met with Pope Benedict XVI in the auditorium of the Shrine of the Annunciation this afternoon. Thanking the leaders for their efforts to help form younger generations dedicated to peace, the Pope appealed for their cooperation in easing tensions over religious places of worship in Galilee.

Benedict XVI began by noting that it is a blessing to be able to visit Nazareth, the place where the angel Gabriel announced Jesus' birth and where Jesus was raised.



Pope Benedict together with numerous religious leaders in Nazareth

Recalling these historical events led the Pope to reflect on the conviction that "the world is a gift of God, and that God has entered the twists and turns of human history." This perspective is the source of Christians' belief that creation has "a reason and a purpose," he explained.

Peace, the Pope noted, is "a gift of God, yet it cannot be achieved without human endeavor." However, he said, "We cannot do whatever we please with the world; rather, we are called to conform our choices to the subtle yet nonetheless perceptible laws inscribed by the Creator upon the universe... ."

The fact that the Pope is in Galilee, a religiously diverse region of Israel, gave him the opportunity to call for the numerous religions to "promote a culture of peace." This can be done, he asserted, through educating the younger generations in "the deeper spiritual values of our common humanity."

The Holy Father pledged Christians' eager participation in joining "Jews, Muslims, Druze and people of other religions in wishing to safeguard children from fanaticism and violence while preparing them to be builders of a better world."

The issue of violence surrounding religious sites was also touched on by the Pope.

In the late 1990s, tensions flared in the square that holds the Basilica of the Annunciation because of plans by Muslims to build a large mosque that would have blocked the view of the basilica. The confrontation over the Israeli government-approved mosque brewed over into clashes between Muslims and Christians just before Pope John Paul II's visit in 1999. In 2003 the Israeli government intervened by sending in troops to demolish the mosque's foundations.

Pope Benedict, aware of the conflict, said in his speech today, "I know that you accept cheerfully and with a greeting of peace the many pilgrims who flock to Galilee. I encourage you to continue exercising mutual respect as you work to ease tensions concerning places of worship, thus assuring a serene environment for prayer and reflection here and throughout Galilee."

At the end of the meeting, the Pope smiled as the leaders joined hands and sang "Shalom, Salam, May the Lord's peace be with you"--a song composed and led by Rabbi Alon Goshen-Gottstein.

Vatican spokesman Fr. Federico Lombardi was asked if this marked the first time on the trip that the Pope prayed with Muslim and Jewish leaders. He replied, "I'd say that the rabbi had a ingenious and creative idea because nobody can object to singing peace."

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