

DPI/NGO Briefing

Pope Benedict's Visit to the United Nations

10 April 2008

Summary

This week's briefing was held on the occasion of Pope Benedict XVI's visit to the United Nations, on 18 April 2008. The briefing focused on the significance of His Holiness' visit and its impact on present global issues. This event was the first in the *Focus on Faith* series, during which the panelists shared their insights into the topic and underlined the links between the principles of the United Nations and – in this case – the Catholic Church. The speakers included: **H.E. Archbishop Celestino Migliore**, Apostolic Nuncio, Permanent Observer of the Holy See to the United Nations; **Sister Dorothy Farley**, Executive Director, International Catholic Organizations/ Information Center at the United Nations; and **Mr. Peter Steinfels**, Co-Director, Fordham University Center on Religion and Culture.

H.E. Archbishop Celestino Migliore began by outlining the previous three Papal visits to the United Nations: in 1965, by Pope Paul VI on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the United Nations; in 1979, by Pope John Paul II, who came again in 1995, on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the United Nations. The Archbishop drew a parallel between the roles of both the United Nations and the Vatican as moral leaders. He said that during his visit, the Pope, was expected to talk about peace. Due to time constraints, he was not likely to speak about any particular world crises, but will recognize the value of human life. The Archbishop stressed the importance to respect human dignity and identify human rights as non-negotiable and un-deniable all over the world. He said that human dignity should be the common denominator tying together all cultures of the world. The Archbishop recognized the anticipation of Pope Benedict XVI's visit and the message he will deliver. The priority of the Holy See was to create dialogue between people of different cultures and therefore interactions between world leaders with different religious beliefs were of utmost importance.

Mr. Peter Steinfels offered his perspective on Catholic identity. He began by analyzing Catholicism in the United States. He noted that 75 percent of Americans had a favourable view of Pope Benedict XVI and most Americans were eager to learn more. According to some public opinion polls 3 out of 10 Americans did not know enough about Pope Benedict XVI to comment. Only two thirds of Americans who were born and raised Catholic still identified themselves with the religion. However, the number of Catholics continues to grow in the United States due to the influx of Catholic immigrants. Mr. Steinfels felt that the Pope's visit would be an introduction to

the United States and would promote the understanding that the Catholic Church was global. He suspected the Pope would not get involved with local American politics. Mr. Steinfelds concluded by discussing the decrease of Catholic priests worldwide. He wondered whether this was a crisis of faith or a crisis of institution.

Sister Dorothy Farley noted the value of her Organization which was not limited to official United Nations documents and conferences, but sharing experiences with constituents from grassroots communities around the world. By citing a fellow Sister's work in South Africa, Sister Farley noted how UN documents gave her work international credibility. Sister Farley discussed ways in which her Organization extended their resources to organizations, such as Catholic International Education Associations, as well as schools, churches, and other outlets of civil society. Furthermore, they reached UN bodies in Paris, Geneva and other areas, including WTO and ILO. She also mentioned other outreach programs such as internships. Sister Farley expressed concern about the lack of physical presence in modern day meetings. She concluded by stressing the importance of Pope's physical presence at the United Nations on 18 April.

During the question-and-answer period, in response to a question whether Pope Benedict XVI would address the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), Archbishop Migliore said that the MDGs coincided with the Gospel. Sister Farley added that the Pope would indirectly address the MDGs when he discussed AIDS, poverty, or any other elements of the MDG agenda. A question was asked in regards to the decreasing number of Catholics throughout the world. The Archbishop answered that this was a complex issue and expressed hope for the Pope to nurture the development of new young groups of Catholics. In response to "religious diversity" argument, the Archbishop cited Pope Benedict XVI's work in which he recognized that truth existed in other religions. He also noted that religious freedom was a basic human right and should be protected by governments. A question was asked in regards to Pope Benedict XVI's reasons for visiting the United Nations. Mr. Steinfelds recognized the visit as a demonstration of the validity and the importance of international institutions. Following, a question was asked related to the lack of female representation in the hierarchy of Catholic leadership. In response to this question, all panelists agreed that this was an important issue and further efforts of power sharing needed to take place. Mr. Steinfelds noted that the movement for dignity and equality of women was supported by the Church. A question was asked why visiting Boston was not in the Pope's itinerary given that most of the sex scandal cases involving the Church had taken place in Boston. The Archbishop responded with the Italian "Basta!" meaning "enough is enough" and added that this visit should be viewed in a positive way. A question was asked regarding the aging constituency on women religious committees. Sister Farley answered by noting that these women deserved recognition and added that "women want to be at the table", which was partly why she accepted the invitation to speak at this briefing.

The briefing was attended by about 200 representatives of NGOs, United Nations and Permanent Mission staff. Several media covered the event, including: Reuters, AP, CNN, Washington Times, SABC, ARD, Notimex, Vilaweb, Ansa, Al Jazeera Arabic and English, Saudi Press Agency, DPA, Al Arabiya, Nikkei Shimbun and others. The archived webcast of the event is available at <http://www.un.org/dpi/ngosection>

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