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Nonbeliever gets hearing at Assisi

by John Thavis by Catholic News Service

ASSISI, Italy -- It isn't every day that the Vatican shares the papal stage with a nonbeliever.

Then again, Julia Kristeva was no flame-throwing atheist. Some sentences of her speech could have been lifted from a papal discourse.

"In order for humanism to develop and re-establish itself, the moment has come to take up again the moral codes constructed through the course of history" and renew them without weakening them, Kristeva told Pope Benedict XVI and about 300 religious representatives Oct. 27 in Assisi.

Kristeva, a Bulgarian-born philosopher and psychoanalyst, was one of four nonbelievers the pope invited to the Assisi interfaith meeting for peace. Their presence was an innovation that sparked questions and even criticism in some conservative quarters.

The program gave Kristeva and the pope the same podium and a global audience, and both spoke in bridge-building language. The pope said he invited the nonbelievers because he was convinced they were seekers who, by looking for truth, in effect are looking for God.

Kristeva said the world today needs to create forms of cooperation between Christian humanism and the humanism of the Enlightenment -- a risky path but one worth taking, she said.

Calling Blessed John Paul II "an apostle of human rights," she quoted his famous words, "Do not be afraid!" That appeal, she said, applies not only to Christians called to witness their faith, but it calls on the church "not to fear European culture."

Kristeva's assertion that "humanism is feminism" might have raised some eyebrows among Vatican officials in attendance. But she followed it up with an intriguing argument that the modern secularized

culture needs to better appreciate the unique relationship between mother and child. If her speech was challenging in its language and philosophical turns, it left church leaders with food for thought.

Certainly, the pope and Kristeva offered quite different perspectives. For the pope, God is the key to every possible human solution to problems of peace and injustice. Kristeva never mentioned God and described the task of renewing culture solely in terms of human efforts.

But they both appeared to agree that they need to talk to each other.

"It is a case of being together on a journey toward truth, a case of taking a decisive stand for human dignity and a case of common engagement for peace against every form of destructive force," the pope said.

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At the closing event in Assisi, another of the invited nonbelievers, Mexican philosopher Guillermo Hurtado, pledged to keep this discussion open, declaring: "We, humanists in dialogue with believers, commit ourselves together with all men and women of good will to building a new world in which respect for the dignity of each and every person ... is the foundation for life in society."

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