

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

June 5, 2012 at 8:30am

Benedict gives direction to US bishops on hot-button issues

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Pope Benedict XVI listens to Archbishop Michael Sheehan of Santa Fe, N.M., during an "ad limina" meeting with bishops from Arizona, Colorado, New Mexico and Wyoming at the Vatican May 5. (CNS/L'Osservatore Romano)

VATICAN CITY -- Over the course of the last six months, Pope Benedict XVI delivered five major speeches to small groups of American bishops who were in Rome for their "ad limina" visits, which are required once every five years.

The "ad limina" visits are the way the pope and Vatican departments keep tabs on bishops from around the world. They are also an occasion for the pope to address the major issues faced by a local church.

In his speeches, Benedict often echoed bishops' concern about religious freedom and the challenges confronting the American church. In his last address, on May 22, he warned bishops of the "threat of a season in which our fidelity to the Gospel may cost us dearly."

The pope didn't directly mention the bishops' recent conflicts with the Obama administration over a birth control mandate and other hot-button issues, but touched on many of the topics at the heart of the controversy, from conscientious objection to gay marriage.

One factor that might have shaped the pope's message to the American bishops in recent months is the relative weakness of the Vatican ambassador to the United States, Archbishop Carlo Maria Viganò.

He is a newcomer to the U.S., having arrived in Washington just weeks before the bishops' visits started. He has been embroiled in the so-called "Vatileaks" scandal with the publication of his private letters to Benedict that denounced widespread "corruption" in the Vatican.

Here's a recap of what Benedict had to say on hot-button issues in these past months.

- Sexual abuse: "It is my hope that the church's conscientious efforts to confront this reality will help the broader community to recognize the causes, true extent and devastating consequences of sexual abuse, and to respond effectively to this scourge which affects every level of society" (Nov. 26).
- "Dissent" within the Catholic church: "The seriousness of the challenges which the church in America ... is called to confront in the near future cannot be underestimated. The obstacles to Christian faith and practice raised by a secularized culture also affect the lives of believers, leading at times to that 'quiet attrition' from the church which you raised with me during my pastoral visit" (Nov. 26).
- "Anti-Christian" culture in America: "At the heart of every culture, whether perceived or not, is a consensus about the nature of reality and the moral good, and thus about the conditions for human flourishing. In America, that consensus, as enshrined in your nation's founding documents, was grounded in a worldview shaped not only by faith but a commitment to certain ethical principles deriving from nature and nature's God. Today that consensus has eroded significantly in the face of powerful new cultural currents which are not only directly opposed to core moral teachings of the Judeo-Christian tradition, but increasingly hostile to Christianity as such" (Jan. 19).
- The church's place in the public square: "The legitimate separation of church and state cannot be taken to mean that the church must be silent on certain issues, nor that the state may choose not to engage, or be engaged by, the voices of committed believers in determining the values which will shape the future of the nation" (Jan. 19).
- Religious freedom: "It is imperative that the entire Catholic community in the United States come to realize the grave threats to the church's public moral witness presented by a radical secularism which finds increasing expression in the political and cultural spheres. The seriousness of these threats needs to be clearly appreciated at every level of ecclesial life. Of particular concern are certain attempts being made to limit that most cherished of American freedoms, the freedom of religion. Many of you have pointed out that concerted efforts have been made to deny the right of conscientious objection on the part of Catholic individuals and institutions with regard to cooperation in intrinsically evil practices. Others have spoken to me of a worrying tendency to reduce religious freedom to mere freedom of worship without guarantees of respect for freedom of conscience" (Jan. 19).
- Catholic politicians: Benedict praised the bishops' "efforts to maintain contacts with Catholics involved in political life and to help them understand their personal responsibility to offer public witness to their faith, especially with regard to the great moral issues of our time: respect for God's gift of life, the protection of human dignity and the promotion of authentic human rights" (Jan. 19).
- Gay marriage: "Particular mention must be made of the powerful political and cultural currents seeking to alter the legal definition of marriage. ... Sexual differences cannot be dismissed as

irrelevant to the definition of marriage. Defending the institution of marriage as a social reality is ultimately a question of justice, since it entails safeguarding the good of the entire human community and the rights of parents and children alike" (March 9).

- Catholic colleges: Benedict condemned the failure to comply with church requirements. Catholic theology teachers "have a mandate from the competent ecclesiastical authority," he said. "The importance of this canonical norm ... becomes all the more evident when we consider the confusion created by instances of apparent dissidence between some representatives of Catholic institutions and the church's pastoral leadership: Such discord harms the church's witness and, as experience has shown, can easily be exploited to compromise her authority and her freedom" (May 5).
- American nuns: "I wish to reaffirm my deep gratitude for the example of fidelity and self-sacrifice given by many consecrated women in your country, and to join them in praying that this moment of discernment will bear abundant spiritual fruit for the revitalization and strengthening of their communities in fidelity to Christ and the church" (May 18).

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