

## **Pope denounces attacks on Christians**

**Robert Mickens, *The Tablet*, 15 January 2011**

Pope Benedict XVI has used his annual New Year gathering with ambassadors accredited to the Holy See to denounce attacks against Christians around the world - including those in Europe.

In a six-page address on Monday, the Pope focused on the theme of his World Day of Peace Message and warned representatives of some 178 countries that the "fundamental human right" of religious freedom was "all too often called into question or violated" today across the globe. But in a highly unusual initiative, he ventured into the realm of the politics of specific countries, prompting immediate responses from Egypt's Government and from Islamist leaders in Pakistan.

In his 28-minute speech, delivered in French in the ornate Sala Regia, the Pope argued for greater respect for all religious minorities but insisted: "It is precisely acts of discrimination against Christians which are considered less grave and less worthy of attention on the part of governments and public opinion." In his most pointed remarks, he urged leaders of Pakistan, where Christians make up less than 2 per cent of the population, to "take the necessary steps" to abrogate the country's anti-blasphemy law. He called the legislation "a pretext for acts of injustice and violence against religious minorities". Islamic party leaders condemned the comments. Farid Paracha, the leader of Jamaat-i-Islami, the most powerful Islamic party in Pakistan, said: "The Pope's statement is an insult to Muslims across the world."

The Pope also renewed appeals to Iraq's civil authorities and its "Muslim religious leaders" to guarantee the security of their "Christian fellow citizens", before turning to the New Year bombing outside a Coptic church in Egypt, that claimed the lives of 23 worshippers, urging Middle Eastern governments to adopt effective measures to protect religious minorities. He also called on the Arabian Peninsula to allow the Catholic Church to "establish suitable pastoral centres" and enjoy unrestricted freedom of worship and religious education. The day after the speech the Egyptian Government called its ambassador back to Cairo "for consultation after the Vatican's new statements that touch on Egyptian affairs and which Egypt considers an unacceptable interference in its internal affairs", a Foreign Ministry spokesman said.

Pope Benedict also took to task countries with a "strict control of state over society", such as China and Cuba, and urged them to allow Catholic communities "autonomy of organisation and freedom to carry out their mission". He deplored violence against Christians in Africa, specifically noting attacks on places of worship in Nigeria.

Benedict XVI also pointed a finger at Europe, saying "obligatory participation in courses of sexual or civic education" in some parts of the EU were "yet another" attack on the religious freedom of families. He criticised European efforts to ban religious feasts and symbols - "of Christianity in particular" - calling these an attack on the cultural roots and social cohesion of the continent.

The Pope lamented the marginalisation of religion in "countries which accord great importance to pluralism and tolerance" and said Christians who were "health care or legal professionals" often had to exercise their professions "with no reference to their religious and moral convictions".