

Plight of Christians in Iraq topic for leaders

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VATICAN CITY — Meeting for the first time, Pope Benedict XVI and U.S. President George W. Bush spoke about the precarious situation of Christians in Iraq and a wide range of other foreign policy and moral issues.

The pope and president looked relaxed as they greeted each other and spoke briefly in front of reporters before their 35-minute private encounter June 9. Bush later held a separate 40-minute meeting with the Vatican's top foreign policy officials.

A Vatican statement described the meetings as "cordial" and said they had focused in part on "the worrisome situation in Iraq and the critical conditions in which the Christian community finds itself." Tens of thousands of Christians have fled Iraq over the last four years to escape violence and discrimination.

The talks also touched on the overall situation in the Middle East, including the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and developments in Lebanon.

"The Holy See again expressed the hope for a 'regional' and 'negotiated' solution to the conflicts and crises that are tormenting the region," the Vatican statement said.

Bush and the pope also discussed problems in Africa, the humanitarian crisis in Darfur and developments in Latin America, it said.

"Finally, there was an examination of current moral and religious questions, including those related to human rights and religious freedom, the defense and promotion of life, marriage and the family, education of new generations and sustainable development," the Vatican said.

Before the president's visit, the Vatican secretary of state, Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, went out of his way to praise Bush for his position on abortion and for "positive initiatives in favor of the defense of life from conception."

The pope smiled broadly as he greeted Bush just outside his private library. The two men shook hands, and the pope ushered the president to a large desk.

Reporters and photographers were allowed to stay for the first minute of the encounter.

"It's good to be with you sir," Bush said as he sat down opposite the pope, crossing his legs and leaning back in a white chair.

"You come from the conference in Heiligendamm?" the pope asked, referring to the Group of Eight meeting of the heads of industrialized countries in Germany.

"I did, your old country. And it was successful," the president replied.

"Successful? You had some decisions? It's not so easy," the pope said. He said it was important for humanity that conferences like this produce decisions.

"It was, you know, a lot of different opinions. But it was good. It was good," Bush said.

The pope asked whether Bush's dialogue with Russian President Vladimir Putin was also good.

The president paused as photographers kept snapping photos and said: "I'll tell you in a minute." Both men laughed. Putin and Bush had sparred over a U.S. proposal to build a missile defense system in Europe.

Bush then went on to tell the pope that he had recently asked Congress for \$30 billion toward fighting the global AIDS crisis, a doubling of the previous U.S. commitment.

After reporters left, the two leaders met privately without aides or interpreters. When the doors of the library opened, Bush's entourage was led into the room and the president introduced them, one by one, to the pope. The pontiff handed each of them a medallion.

The pope and the president also exchanged gifts. Bush gave the pope a long wooden walking stick with a design representing the Ten Commandments. When the pope picked it up, Bush told him it had been made by a former homeless man in Dallas.

"The Ten Commandments?" the pope asked, looking at the inscriptions.

"Yes, sir," Bush answered.

The pope presented Bush with an engraving of St. Peter's Basilica and a gold medallion of



CNS photo/Kevin Lamarque, Reuters

U.S. President George W. Bush leans down to take a closer look at a gold papal coin presented to him by Pope Benedict XVI during his visit to the Vatican June 9.

his pontificate. The president put on his glasses to give it a closer look and remarked, "It's beautiful, thank you very much."

Afterward, Bush and several top aides met with Cardinal Bertone and other Vatican foreign policy officials.

The Vatican's concern about Iraq was underlined in another way during the Bush visit. As the president and the pope ended their meeting, the Vatican released a statement by the newly appointed prefect of the Congregation for Eastern Churches, Archbishop Leonardo Sandri, who said many Eastern-rite Catholics were suffering in Iraq,

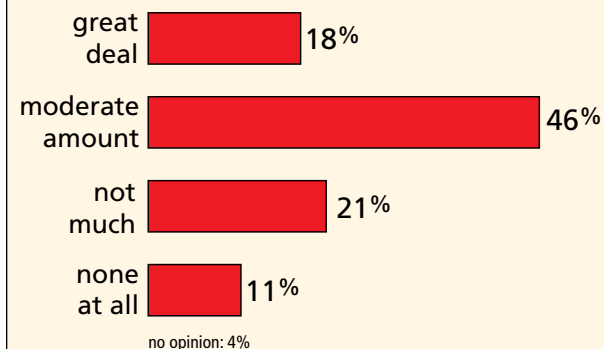
Lebanon and elsewhere because of "war, violence or fear of an uncertain future."

"I think also of those who must leave their homeland and everything they own," Archbishop Sandri said. Church officials have been increasingly distressed at the exodus of Iraqi Catholics following the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003.

The last time Bush came for a papal audience, in 2004, Pope John Paul II told him of his deep concern for the situation in Iraq and reminded the president of the "unequivocal position" taken by the Vatican against the war.

Papal Advice

How much attention should president Bush pay to Pope Benedict's ideas about policy?



Results are based on telephone interviews with a randomly selected national sample of 1,007 adults, conducted June 1-3, 2007. Source: 2007 Gallup poll ©2007 CNS