

Pope acknowledges colonial-era abuses: After criticism for minimizing injustices

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Facing strong criticism after saying in Brazil that Christianity was not forced upon the indigenous people of the Americas, Pope Benedict XVI has admitted to “shadows that accompanied the work of evangelization” in Latin America.

“It is impossible to forget the sufferings and injustices inflicted by colonizers on the indigenous peoples, who often had their basic human rights trampled on,” said Benedict during his weekly public audience May 23 at the Vatican.

“But the very mention of these unjustifiable crimes . . . must not stop us from expressing gratitude for the wonderful work carried out by divine grace among those populations in these past five centuries,” he said, noting also that Christian missionaries and theologians had defended indigenous people.

Indigenous rights groups had criticized comments by Benedict in his May 13 opening address in Aparecida, Brazil, to the fifth general conference of bishops from Latin America and the Caribbean. In that speech, Benedict said that Christianity in Latin America did not involve “the imposition of a foreign culture.”

Back in Rome, the pope did not issue an apology for what many commentators said was a revisionist historical account. The presidents of Bolivia and Venezuela joined the chorus of outrage by descendants of native peoples.

Mauricio Arias, leader of the Indigenous National Council of Ayllus, in Bolivia, protested the image presented by the pontiff in Brazil: “The Catholic religion was imposed with force and repression, ignoring our beliefs and our faith.”

The confederation of Quechua peoples in Ecuador said that representatives of the Catholic Church had been complicit in “one of the most horrendous examples of genocide in the world,” in which they said more than 70 million people died.

The pope's comments May 23 were "balanced," said Bishop José Maria Yanguas of Spain. "Obviously, the problem is complex; we need to distinguish between 'evangelization' and 'conquest'—two very different things," said Yanguas. – *Ecumenical News International*