

Pope warns against 'prophetic actions' Remarks may have been aimed at mainline: Remarks may have been aimed at mainline

News in the [May 20, 2008](#) issue

Pope Benedict XVI capped a six-day visit to the United States, his first as pontiff, with a public mass at New York's Yankee Stadium in which he declared the need for U.S. Catholics to be obedient to church authority. To more than 50,000 people, the pope praised the U.S. legacy of freedom but reminded Catholics of their church loyalties.

While the April 15-20 visit is likely to be remembered for the pope's repeated public declarations of shame about the sexual-abuse scandals that have rocked the Catholic Church, Benedict also met with a range of U.S. Christian leaders and left them wondering if he had delivered a jab at the Episcopal Church and other mainline denominations.

In a homily April 18 at a New York church, the pope voiced concern about what he described as the "splintering" of Christian churches over "so-called prophetic actions that are based on a hermeneutic not always consonant with the datum of scripture and tradition." Such actions, he said, mean that Christian "communities consequently give up the attempt to act as a unified body, choosing instead to function according to the idea of 'local options,'" thus losing ties to other Christians past and present.

Although the term *local option* has been used derisively by internal critics in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America in connection with the ordination of gay and lesbian clergy in recent years, some observers thought the pope was aiming his remarks at the Episcopal Church and its approval of a gay bishop in 2003.

Mark S. Sisk, the Episcopal bishop of New York, demurred from that assessment. He said that reporters were “reading too much into” the pope’s remarks and into the absence of Episcopal presiding bishop Katharine Jefferts Schori, who had a prior commitment.

“I don’t think he was trying to send a shot across the bow at a particular church,” said Sisk, who greeted the pope personally. “This was not the place to try to do that.”

Likewise, Jim Naughton, communications director for the Episcopal Diocese of Washington, said on his blog, Episcopal Cafe, that if Benedict wanted to pick a fight with the Episcopal Church, the pope would not have invited liberal Episcopal bishop John Chane to a mass in Washington earlier in the visit.

However, reporters also recalled that in 2003, when Benedict was still Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, he sent a telegram expressing the “heartfelt prayers” of Pope John Paul II to a protest meeting in Texas of the conservative American Anglican Council. “The significance of your meeting is sensed far beyond Plano,” the telegram said.

On April 18 Benedict told leaders at the United Nations that human rights are “inscribed on human hearts” and asked them to work together to eradicate violence and poverty and to care for the environment.

In his speech the pope appeared to align himself with those who say that international action is an obligation in cases in which countries are unable to protect their citizens or, still worse, acts of violence are committed against them. -*Religion News Service, Ecumenical News International*