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'Practical atheism' more destructive than disbelief, Pope says
By Matthew A. Rarey

Vatican City, Nov 14, 2012 / 10:45 am ([CNA/EWTN News](#)).- The practical atheism of those who say they are Christian but live as if God does not exist is a greater threat than actual atheism, Pope Benedict XVI said as he presented three ways for people to more fully discover God.

While actual atheists often think deeply about God before rejecting belief, practical atheism “is even more destructive ... because it leads to indifference towards faith and the question of God,” the Pope stated.

His fourth installment in a series of lessons on faith was delivered Nov. 14 to an overflow crowd of nearly 7,000 in the Pope Paul VI Hall, near St. Peter’s Square.

Benedict XVI focused his address on the challenge of witnessing to Christ in today’s world.

Christian witness is always hard, he said, because people are prone to “being dazzled by the glitter of worldliness,” but in the Western world sharing the faith is even harder today.

As he described it, the Christian faith was the everyday reality for most people in what used to be called Christendom. The burden was on non-believers to justify their disbelief.

But today the tables have turned following a long slide into atheism, skepticism and a secular worldview that was ushered in by the Enlightenment.

This, in turn, has paved the way for moral and spiritual disaster in the Western world. People have become confused about ethics once commonly held, making room for relativism and fostering “an ambiguous conception of freedom, which instead of being liberating ends up binding man to idols,” the Pope said.

In response to the ensuing moral and spiritual chaos, Pope Benedict called on all people to discover God by following three paths.

The first path involves contemplating creation. “The world is not a shapeless magma, but the more we know, the more we discover the amazing mechanisms, the more we see a pattern, we see that there is a creative intelligence,” the pontiff remarked.

The second way of finding God is through inner contemplation. The Holy Father quoted St. Augustine’s famous saying, “Do not go outside yourself, come back into yourself: truth dwells in the heart of man.” He also observed that the modern world is full of distractions that make it hard “to stop and take a deep look within ourselves and read that thirst for

the infinite that we carry within, pushing us to go further and towards that Someone who can satisfy it.”

The third path, faith, is a dimly lit path for many people who view it as a limited aspect of life, if not a form of “illusion, escapism...or sentimentality.”

But in reality, the Pope stated, faith concerns the truth about mankind and our eternal destinies.

“Faith ... is an encounter with God who speaks and acts in history and which converts our daily life, transforming our mentality, system of values, choices and actions,” he said. Faith is “not illusion, escapism, a comfortable shelter, sentimentality, but involvement in every aspect of life and proclamation of the Gospel, the Good News which can liberate all of man.”

Yet, many people consider Christianity as a mere system of beliefs and morals instead of God’s self-revelation in history so that he could have a loving relationship with his creatures.

“Christianity, before being a moral or ethical value, is the experience of love, of welcoming the person of Jesus,” Pope Benedict stated, calling on all Christians to learn better the faith they profess and purify their lives in conformity with Christ.

After the Pope summarized his message in different languages and prayed the Our Father in Latin, the visiting men and boys of England’s Choir of Westminster Abbey burst into a joyful hymn.

Jim and Joyce Vieland, visiting Rome for the first time with other pilgrims from the Diocese of Cleveland, were enthralled by the experience.

“It was tranquil, yet joyous,” said Mr. Vieland of Chardon, Ohio. “What I took away was the message that if you give joy to Jesus, then others, you yourself will be happy.”

Mrs. Vieland rejoiced in the unity of Catholicism on display in the hall, with so many people from around the world professing their common faith.

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