

## Pope says he is a ‘pilgrim of peace’ as he arrives in Lebanon



*Lebanon's President Michel Suleiman looks on as Pope Benedict XVI speaks during a welcoming ceremony at Beirut's airport (Photo: CNS)*

Pope Benedict XVI has arrived in Lebanon, saying that he comes “as a pilgrim of peace, as a friend of God and as a friend of men”.

In his remarks at a welcoming ceremony at Beirut’s airport, Pope Benedict praised Lebanon, with a mixed population of Christians and Muslims, for its distinctive record of “coexistence and respectful dialogue”.

But speaking in a country that was devastated by a civil war from 1975 to 1990, the Pope acknowledged that Lebanese society’s “equilibrium, which is presented everywhere as an example, is extremely delicate”.

“Sometimes it seems about to snap like a bow which is overstretched or submitted to pressures,” he

said.

The Pope urged Lebanese to do everything possible to maintain this social equilibrium, which he said “should be sought with insistence, preserved at all costs and consolidated with determination”.

Earlier in the day, speaking to reporters on the plane from Rome, Pope Benedict addressed some of the turbulence currently afflicting the rest of the Middle East. He praised the Arab Spring, a revolutionary wave that toppled dictatorships in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen, and has dragged Syria, just across the border from Lebanon, into civil war.

The Pope said the movement represented positive aspirations for democracy and liberty and hence a “renewed Arab identity”. But he warned against the danger of forgetting that “human liberty is always a shared reality”, and consequently failing to protect the rights of Christian minorities in Muslim countries.

Many Middle Eastern Christians fear that revolution has empowered Islamist extremism in the region, increasing the danger of attacks and persecution of the sort that Iraq’s Christians have suffered since the fall of Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein.

Asked about the current exodus of Christians from war-torn Syria, the Pope noted that Muslims, too, have been fleeing the violence there. He went on to say that the best way to preserve the Christian presence in Syria was to promote peace, among other ways by restricting sales of military arms.

Speaking only three days after the killing of the US ambassador to Libya and three of his staff members, the Pope told reporters that he had never considered cancelling his visit to Lebanon out of security concerns, and that no one had advised him to do so.

By Francis X Rocca