

Pope Benedict XVI calls for 'reconciliation' in Africa

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November 22, 2011

VATICAN CITY (RNS) Pope Benedict XVI ended his second papal trip to Africa on Sunday (Nov. 20) with a call for "reconciliation, justice and peace" in a troubled continent that he nonetheless called a "land of hope."

The pope's three-day visit to the West African country of Benin culminated in an open-air Mass in the capital city of Cotonou, attended by an estimated 80,000 faithful, including Catholics from Nigeria and other neighboring countries.

Bearing up under temperatures in the mid to high 80s, the 84-year-old pope spoke in French, English, Portuguese and the local indigenous language of Fon, calling attention to the "poor, the weak, the outcast" and offering a special greeting to victims of HIV/AIDS.

In his homily, Benedict made what many observers took as an allusion to corruption among African leaders, drawing a contrast between the worldly royal attributes of "success, power, money and ability" and the "glory of Christ," who "makes himself the servant of the little ones."

Following the Mass, Benedict presented Catholic bishops from across Africa with an authoritative papal document entitled "Africae Munus" ("The Commitment of Africa"), based on a three-week synod of African bishops held at the Vatican in October 2009.

The 130-page document calls on government authorities, traditional chiefs and "ordinary citizens" to eliminate the causes of violent conflict, and to care for the "poor, the hungry, the sick, the imprisoned, the migrant, the refugee and the displaced."

A brief passage on AIDS acknowledges the need for a "medical and pharmaceutical response," but argues that "above all, (AIDS) is an ethical problem" calling for "sexual abstinence, rejection of sexual promiscuity (and) fidelity within marriage."

During his first visit to Africa in 2009, Benedict provoked an international furor when he said that condoms "increase the problem" of AIDS; he did not address that topic on his return visit.

The new papal document also stresses the importance of dialogue with Islam and practitioners of indigenous African religions.

In the 20th century, the Catholic population of sub-Saharan Africa has grown from less than 2 million to nearly 140 million, and the continent produces priests at a higher rate than any other part of the world.

Catholics make up almost one-third of Benin's population of 9 million, and this year marks the 150th anniversary of the Catholic Church's presence in the country, which has become a regional hub for missionary work in Africa.

On Saturday, Benedict visited the city of Ouidah, an international center of the indigenous religion of Vodoun, or Voodoo. Benedict urged African Catholics to abandon traditional practices that clash with Christianity, which he said "liberates from occultism and vanquishes evil spirits."

Earlier on Saturday, Benedict spoke to Benin's president and other dignitaries at the

presidential palace in Cotonou, where he appealed to "all political and economic leaders" in Africa and beyond: "Do not deprive your peoples of hope. Do not cut them off from their future by mutilating their present."

The pope also warned against yielding to an overly "bleak analysis" of Africa's problems.

"It is tempting to point to what does not work," Benedict said. "It is easy to assume the judgmental tone of the moralizer or of the expert who imposes his conclusions and proposes, at the end of the day, few useful solutions."