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New Year's resolution: Make 2009 the 'Year of Africa'

by John L. Allen Jr.

All Things Catholic

Editor's Note: We're posting Allen's Friday column early this week because of the New Year holiday.

'Tis the season for New Year's resolutions, and in that spirit, I'd like to propose a resolution for Catholics everywhere: To make 2009 truly the 'Year of Africa' that Pope Benedict XVI intends.

Three major events point to 2009 as a 'Year of Africa' at the level of the Vatican and papal activity: Benedict's scheduled visit in March to Cameroon and Angola; a plenary assembly of SECAM, the Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar, to be staged in Rome in September, in order to galvanize Western interest; and a Synod for Africa, a gathering of bishops from around the world, to be held in the Vatican during October.

In a recent interview on Vatican Radio, the papal spokesperson, Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi, laid out the logic for this 'preferential option for Africa' in the coming year.

'The suffering of the African people is enormous,' Lombardi said. 'There are terrifying massacres of the poor, and there are situations of famine, as we've seen in Zimbabwe in recent days.'

The question Benedict XVI intends to pose, Lombardi said, is this: 'What must we do, not only to overcome these dramatic situations, but so that a continent of such great potential, of such enormous resources - both material and, above all, human resources - can make its contribution to humanity, and to the church of today and tomorrow?'

“The commitment of the pope offers us an example,” Lombardi said, “but all of us must look to this continent in the year that’s coming.”

Without any doubt, Africa is where humanity today is most dramatically walking the Via Crucis:

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- The number of Africans living in extreme poverty, meaning less than \$1 a day, is projected by the United Nations to rise to 404 million in 2015. Some 800 million Africans suffer from chronic hunger, including 300 million children.
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- Roughly 25 million Africans are living with HIV/AIDS, representing six percent of the adult population, with an estimated two million deaths each year. Between 12 and 14 million African children have been orphaned by AIDS.
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- An estimated 11 million African children die each year due to preventable diseases such as malaria, measles, diarrhea and pneumonia.
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- Forty-two million school-aged children in Africa are not enrolled in school. In 2000 alone, 860,000 children in sub-Saharan Africa lost teachers due to AIDS, and it’s estimated that some 15-20 percent of teachers on the continent have died from the disease.
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- Between 1990 and 2005, twenty-three African nations have been involved in armed conflicts, claiming tens of millions of lives and, according to an Oxfam report, squandering almost \$300 billion – an annual loss of 15 percent of Gross Domestic Product. Upheaval in the Democratic Republic of Congo alone, according to one estimate, has left four million people dead – conflict fueled in part by a global scramble for Congo’s mineral resources, including cobalt, which is used in cell phone batteries. On a recent trip to the United States, Bishop Fulgence Muteba Mugalu of Kilwa said that “Catholics and governments should understand that each cell phone contains a drop of innocent Congolese blood.”
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Of course, the church’s interest in Africa is not exclusively humanitarian. Africa also represents the greatest “growth market,” so to speak, for Catholicism anywhere in the world. The Catholic population of sub-Saharan Africa exploded from 1.9 million in 1900 to 139 million in 2000, a staggering growth rate of 6,708 percent. The pope and other senior church leaders perceive a direct institutional interest in promoting peace and development in Africa, in order to consolidate these missionary gains.

Hence the obvious resolution for 2009: To do whatever we can, at whatever level and in whatever context we find ourselves, to promote thought, prayer and action on behalf of Africa.

To offer some concrete possibilities:

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- Leaders at the parish level could invite a local expert on Africa to address adult faith formation programs, to speak in the parish school, or to offer some brief reflections at the end of Sunday Mass. March offers a natural moment for such events, since Benedict will physically be in Africa at that time, as well as September and October, during the SECAM assembly and the Synod for Africa.
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- Few dioceses in the West these days don't have at least one African priest. Make that guy a local celebrity in 2009, inviting him to say Mass in parishes around the diocese, to speak at deanery meetings, to visit Catholic schools, and so on.
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- Catholic charities already do Herculean work on behalf of Africa, and 2009 represents a natural moment to aggressively promote those activities. Special collections could be organized, new advocacy campaigns could be launched, and Africa experts can hit the road to tell their stories.
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- Catholic colleges and universities could launch new programs of academic study focusing on Africa, as well as high-profile lecture series and other public events. Inevitably, there's ferocious disagreement among development experts about exactly how to promote change: some advocate massive assistance from developed nations, others focus on economic development and global trade, still others on fighting corruption. Catholic universities can offer a laboratory for testing ideas and fostering debate.
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- The Catholic press, both print and broadcast, could prepare a series of features on Africa, focusing both on the church on the continent as well as current political and social issues. Catholic media could make a commitment to integrating news from Africa more systematically into its routine coverage.
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- Catholic institutions of all sorts could be attentive to opportunities throughout 2009 to shine a spotlight on Africa. For example, whenever a visiting African bishop, religious sister, or lay activist happens to be in town, make a big deal out of it. Sponsor a public lecture, arrange for that person to meet with the local media, and so on. Benedict XVI's focus on Africa will help create an atmosphere in which people are paying attention, at least intermittently; the challenge is to exploit that atmosphere to raise consciousness at the local level.

While these ideas apply everywhere, they arguably have a special logic in America. Barack Obama is not only the President-elect of the United States, but also, effectively, the uncrowned king of Africa. He's by far the most popular political figure in the world among Africans right now, a leader invested with almost messianic expectations. That gives him political capital on the continent that no other global figure can rival, creating a window of opportunity to make things happen. American Catholics can help push the Obama White House in this direction, and mobilize support if it responds.

There are, of course, serious obstacles to be overcome. The economic crisis in the United States creates a powerful temptation for Americans to turn inward, focusing on domestic problems. Whatever attention we have left over for foreign policy may be occupied by the crisis du jour in the Holy Land and by ongoing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

For Catholics, there are also internal reasons why Benedict's push on Africa may be a tough sell. "Peace and justice" Catholics tend to occupy the church's left wing, which is sometimes crankily resistant to papal initiatives, even when they cut in a direction liberals otherwise support. For example, an utterly predictable chorus is likely to arise on the Catholic left in '09 to the effect of, "If the pope wants to do something for Africa, why doesn't he come out in favor of condoms to fight AIDS?" Such stale polemics often get in the way of doing something constructive. Conservative Catholics, meanwhile, talk a good

game about 'thinking with the church,' but can be selective in their follow-through. If the pope criticizes abortion, they're ready to mount the barricades; if he tackles poverty and war, many will quietly suggest he's out of his depth, or that he's wading into matters of prudential judgment that don't oblige conscience.

All of that, however, makes turning 2009 into a 'Year of Africa' complicated, not impossible. For reasons both pastoral and prophetic, Africa is a critical proving ground for the Catholic future. This is one case, moreover, in which no one can complain about papal 'silence'.

The drama of '09 is not whether the pope will lead; it's whether the rest of us will follow. Doing so is a resolution well worth making.

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