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Five reasons the papal trip to Africa is important

by John L. Allen Jr.

All Things Catholic

Whenever there's big papal news in the air, my phone usually rings off the hook from media outlets in various parts of the globe. If the phone isn't ringing, therefore, it's a fairly reliable sign that the pope is currently flying below radar.

On the cusp of Pope Benedict XVI's maiden voyage to Africa, visiting Cameroon and Angola March 17-23, the silence from my phone is deafening.

While anything's possible, my sense heading into the trip is that barring some bolt from the blue, most news organizations are likely to settle for brief and generic accounts. If so, it will be both tragic and a journalistic miscalculation, for reasons I'll develop below.

First, let me outline the motives for the neglect.

In the first place: It's the economy, stupid. Airfare for the papal plane this time costs \$7,000, and when you throw in six nights in overpriced hotels, food, fees for visas and accreditation, Internet time, and so on, news organizations are looking at \$10,000 or more to send a correspondent as part of the papal party. Under any circumstances that's a hefty investment, but in the midst of a global depression, it's understandably more than some editors are willing to shell out. (I know of a few reporters who normally travel with the pope not making the trip for this reason, and I'm flying commercial, not on the papal plane, to hold down costs.)

In part, the Africa swing is the victim of bad timing. Just days ago, dates for Benedict's trip in May to the Holy Land were announced. Given the drama of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, combined with tumult surrounding the pope's decision to lift the excommunication of a Holocaust-denying bishop, the Israel trip looms as a far "sexier" story. I've already had conversations with TV outlets about coverage of

Benedict in Israel; several of those producers were actually surprised to learn the pope is going to Africa.

In part, the lack of interest is simply because it's Africa. In general, news about Africa doesn't sell unless there's a calamity -- genocide, mass starvation, and the like. Paradoxically, the fact that Cameroon has enjoyed decades of peace, and that Angola ended its long-running civil war seven years ago, make them less compelling from a news point of view. If the pope were going to Darfur, it would be a different story.

Finally, there's the fact that the protagonist is Benedict himself. Four years into his papacy, most secular media outlets feel they have a read on him as a newsmaker: good for the occasional scandal, but otherwise a non-story. If there's no hint of controversy, the sheer pull of Benedict's personality isn't enough to galvanize interest. By way of contrast, if this were Barack Obama's first trip to Africa, you could pretty much guarantee saturation coverage.

That said, here are five reasons why I think the trip is actually a gripping tale to tell:

Africa is the future: The single most important Catholic story of the 20th century -- more consequential in the long run than the Lateran Pacts, Pius XII, the Second Vatican Council, and even John Paul II -- was the shift in the church's center of gravity from North to South. In 1900, just 25 percent of the Catholic population lived in the southern hemisphere. Today that figure stands at 66 percent, or two-thirds of the world's 1.1 billion Catholics, and by mid-century the southern share is projected to be 75 percent. As Auguste Comte reputedly once said, "Demography is destiny." The tone in the Catholic church increasingly will be set by bishops, theologians, and lay activists from the south, especially from Africa. During the 20th century, the Catholic population in sub-Saharan Africa exploded from 1.9 million to 130 million, an astonishing growth rate of 6,708 percent. There's a youthful energy about the church in Africa, as well as a sense that its historical moment has arrived. For all its travails, Catholicism remains in the realm of religion what the United States is in geopolitics, i.e., a super-power, and to a large extent the destiny of that superpower will be forged in Africa. For an object lesson in the upheaval this transition is likely to generate, look no further than the current crisis in Anglicanism over gay bishops and homosexuality.

There are terrific stories to report: While in Cameroon, Benedict XVI will meet a delegation of African Muslims, offering his first comments outside Rome about Christian-Islamic relations since his 2006 trip to Turkey. In Angola, he'll meet with movements involved in fighting for women's rights. The Angola portion of the trip also takes Benedict to the world's eighth largest oil-producing nation, pumping out 1.9 million barrels per day of high-quality crude. Angola fought a bloody civil war from 1975 to 2002 precisely over control of those resources. Cameroon, meanwhile, is home to one of the longest-serving strongmen in Africa, President Paul Biya, who through intimidation and pay-offs has managed to stay in power since 1982. The 76-year-old is widely expected to prevail again in faux elections in 2011, despite the fact that he now spends considerable portions of every year abroad in semi-seclusion. (A favorite hangout is apparently the Hotel Intercontinental in Geneva.) If you can't make something out of the "clash of civilizations," women's issues, oil, and corruption, you don't belong in the news business. For additional background see my interview with veteran Cameroon journalist, **Charly Ndi Chia**.

Benedict and Barack can do business: The Africa trip also offers an intriguing angle on church-state relations in the Age of Obama, at a moment when the administration's policies on the "life issues" seem to be setting the stage for protracted cultural war. When it comes to Africa, the pope and the president share a common concern for peace, development, and social justice; moreover, they each bring unique resources to making things happen. Catholicism's massive 20th century gains across Africa have generated important political and social capital, while Obama's biography and popularity make him

virtually the uncrowned king of Africa. Together, the pope and the president might be able to move the ball in terms of cajoling the international community, as well as African leaders themselves, to get their act together.

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At the level of showbiz, it's vintage casting against type: All by itself, watching the globe's most consummate old-world European try to play on the African stage ought to be great theater. So far, Benedict has demonstrated a remarkable capacity to stretch when the situation demands it; witness his bravura performances during his two World Youth Day outings, experiences crafted to suit the personality of his more exuberant predecessor, John Paul II. But the challenges awaiting him aren't simply at level of stagecraft; substantively, the question is whether, despite his European baggage, Benedict will 'get' Africa. Case in point: Will the pope grasp that his fight against a 'dictatorship of relativism' in the West is largely moot in Africa, where the grass-roots reality is not shaped by secular indifference, but rather a highly competitive religious marketplace? In Africa, the main rivals to the faith are repackaged forms of African traditional religion, exotic new cults, mushrooming forms of Christian Pentecostalism, and aggressively proselytizing forms of Islam. Will this teaching pope be able to craft a lesson that speaks to Africa's experience, which in many ways is so different from his own?

It's the right thing to do: Especially in the United States, the media is not a public trust, it's a for-profit business. Nonetheless, every now and then we ought to tell a story just because it's important -- and if ever there were a case for doing so, Africa's it. On the United Nations' list of the world's 15 most impoverished nations, nine are in Africa. Last year, some 1.5 million Africans died of HIV/AIDS, and 22 million Africans are infected with the disease. Out of 13 million deaths around the world between 1994 and 2003 due to armed conflicts, the U.N. estimates that more than 9 million occurred in sub-Saharan Africa. The economic crisis is likely to make all this worse, and it's obscene to allow such suffering to pass in silence. Yet Africa is also more than its dysfunction; the injustice Africans experience from poverty, disease and bloodshed is often compounded by the injustice that the outside world pays attention only to their bad news, ignoring Africa's vitality. (Aside from the peaceful regime change in South Africa, what's the last good news report you remember from Africa?) Benedict's trip offers a window of opportunity to tell Africa's story, both its heartbreak and its heroism; indeed, part of the reason popes make these trips is to shine a spotlight on forgotten places and peoples.

To editors and producers everywhere, it's not too late to get into the game.

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John Allen will be in Africa covering Pope Benedict XVI's March 17-23 trip to Cameroon and Angola. Watch the NCR web site for his daily reports.

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