

## Benedict needs to show that he 'gets' Africa

John L. Allen Jr. | Mar. 13, 2009



Students hold rosaries at the minor seminary of St. Therese of Mvolye in Yaounde, Cameroon, Feb. 9. (CNS)

The problem with first impressions, as the saying goes, is that you only get to make one.

As Pope Benedict XVI prepares for his African debut March 17-23, visiting Cameroon and Angola on his first swing through Catholicism's most dynamic "growth market," he faces a series of dilemmas:

- How to raise consciousness about the continent's travails without feeding African resentments that Westerners only report bad news;
- Signaling that despite his European baggage, the pope "gets" Africa ? for example, that his crusade against a Western "dictatorship of relativism" is largely moot here, since the grass-roots reality is not secularism but rather vibrant religious pluralism;
- Keeping lines of communication open with his local hosts without glossing over a serious "democratic deficit" in their regimes;
- Encouraging the vibrancy of African Catholicism without turning a blind eye to its growing pains ? including a sometimes shallow sense of Catholic identity and the lingering tug of tribal and regional divisions.

Africa, in many ways, symbolizes the Catholic future. Two-thirds of the world's 1.1 billion Catholics today live in the Southern Hemisphere, a figure projected to be three-quarters by midcentury. In September, Africa's bishops will hold their plenary assembly in Rome, and in October Benedict will summon a synod of bishops on Africa. (The pope will present the *Instrumentum laboris*, or "working paper," for the synod in Cameroon March 19.)

Perhaps Benedict's main advantage on the 11th foreign trip of his papacy is that, at least demographically, it takes him to the heart of the most compelling success story Catholicism has going.

During the 20th century, the Catholic population in sub-Saharan Africa exploded from 1.9 million to 130 million, a staggering growth rate of 6,708 percent ? a result driven by a combination of overall population growth, the breakdown of old tribal religions, and missionary success. Religious vocations are also booming. For example, Nigeria's Bigard Memorial Seminary, with an enrollment of over 1,100, is the largest Catholic seminary in the world, and more than 700 African-born priests are now estimated to be serving in American

parishes. Yet despite this phenomenal harvest, there is no priest surplus in Africa, because Africans are being baptized even more rapidly than they're being ordained. (In the United States, the ratio of priests to lay Catholics is 1-to-1,300; in Africa, it's almost 1-to-5,000.)

Gambian theologian Lamin Sanneh of Yale points out that the real explosion in African Christianity took place in the second part of the 20th century, when foreign missionaries had either withdrawn or grown tepid about conversion ? meaning that this "African miracle" has been largely a home-grown enterprise.

It's not as if African Catholicism is a Johnny-come-lately. Early African fathers such as Augustine of Hippo and Cyprian of Carthage left a deep imprint, and Benedict XVI is traveling to Angola to celebrate the 500th anniversary of Christianity's arrival there. Nonetheless, given that 41 percent of Africa's population is under 14, there's a youthful energy to the African church. In a recent Q and A with Roman priests, Benedict made the point: "To see that there's not only a tired church, as one frequently finds in Europe, but a young church, full of the joy of the Holy Spirit, is certainly spiritually refreshing."

Yet local observers say formation in the faith can sometimes be skin-deep, since many African Catholics fall back on indigenous beliefs in moments of crisis. They may go to Mass on Sunday, but then also consult a tribal shaman when a child is sick or a job has been lost. During a February 2007 symposium at the Catholic University of East Africa in Kenya, experts warned that witchcraft is "destroying" the church in Africa, in part because skeptical, Western-educated clergy are not responding adequately to people's spiritual needs.

"We have to put that down to insufficient catechesis and insufficient inculturation," said Fr. Patrick Lafon, former secretary general of the bishops' conference in Cameroon and today a doctoral candidate at The Catholic University of America in Washington.

Catholicism's 20th-century boom in Africa could prove to be transitory. During the Synod of Bishops on the Bible last fall in Rome, Cardinal Polycarp Pengo of Tanzania, president of the Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar, warned of an "exodus" of Catholics to Pentecostal churches all across the continent.

There's also little evidence that Christian morality has transformed African societies.

For example, Benedict will have a chance to see the problem of corruption up close, as Transparency International ranks both Cameroon and Angola among the 40 most corrupt nations on earth. To take just one illustration, Christophe Droeven, a representative of Catholic Relief Services in Cameroon, points out that one 1,200-mile stretch of highway from the Port of Douala in the east to the northern border with Chad counts more than 150 roadblocks ? in other words, one roughly every 8 miles. At each roadblock, travelers may be expected to pay a bribe.

African bishops have made tough statements about corruption, and Catholic Relief Services has developed anticorruption curricula for local schools. In Cameroon, those materials are being used in 1,000 Catholic schools across the country. So far, however, there's little indication that these efforts have had the desired impact.

Memories of the 1994 genocide in Rwanda also still smolder, when Catholic Hutus and Catholic Tutsis slaughtered one another with appalling indifference to the dignity of human life.

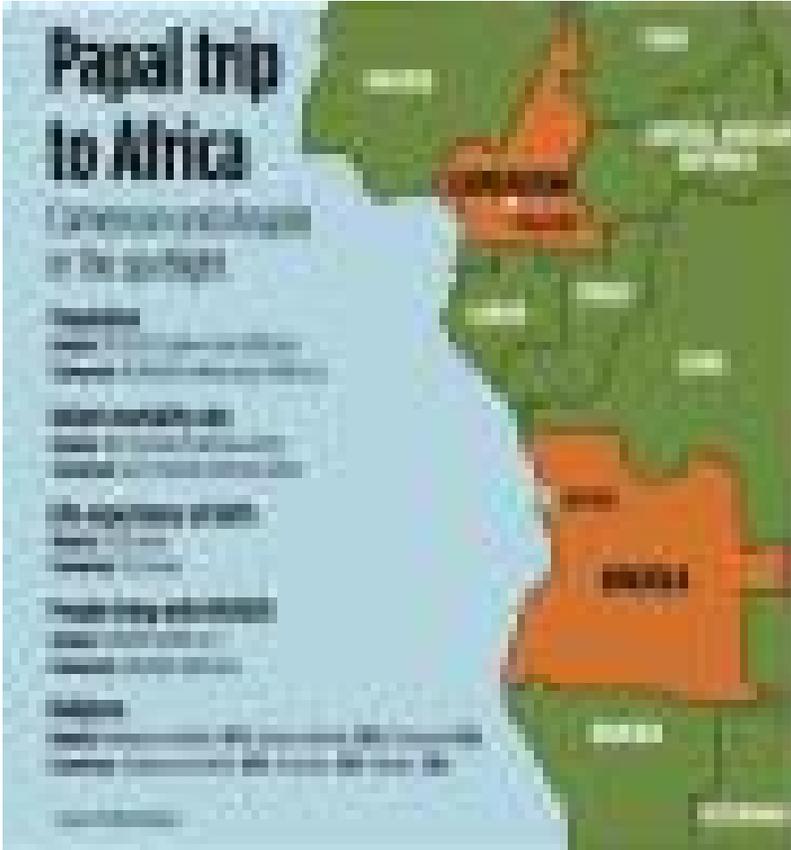
Other commonly cited challenges include:

- Reconciling church teaching on marriage with the still-common polygamy in some parts of Africa;
- Addressing intra-Catholic tensions between vigorous African orthodoxy on matters such as homosexuality and clerical authority, which sometimes chafes against more liberal currents in the global

North;

- Managing the sometimes fractious relationship with Islam. In Nigeria, occasional interfaith violence since the late '80s has left hundreds dead.

Benedict also clearly hopes to confront social and political forces impeding Africa's development. One index of urgency: On the United Nations' list of the world's 15 least developed nations, nine are in Africa. In 2008, some 1.5 million Africans died of HIV/AIDS, and 22 million Africans are infected with the disease.



In Cameroon and Angola, Benedict has chosen

two nations that illustrate African realities.

Both ought to be rich. Angola rivals Nigeria as the largest oil producer in Africa and also has considerable diamond deposits. Cameroon is home to the largest port in central Africa and has sizeable resources of both timber and oil. Yet poverty remains chronic, a result of both violence (especially in Angola, where a civil war from 1975 to 2002 claimed an estimated 500,000 lives) and bad government.

Cameroon, in the eyes of many observers, offers an object lesson in faux democracy. The 76-year-old President Paul Biya has been in power in some form since 1975 and is widely expected to prevail again in 2011 elections despite living a sizeable chunk of each year in semi-seclusion abroad. In 2006, writer David Wallechinsky included Biya on a rundown of the world's 20 "worst living dictators." Biya is a former Catholic seminarian.

Many hope the pope will back local bishops in demands for greater transparency, accountability and a sense of the common good.

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[A brief look at Cameroon](#) [1]

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Benedict will not barnstorm up and down his host countries à la John Paul II but will remain in one location, in both cases the national capitals: Yaoundé in Cameroon and Luanda in Angola. While in Cameroon, Benedict will meet local Muslims, and in Angola he'll address Catholic movements involved in women's issues.

The Africa trip is one of two foreign voyages currently on Benedict's calendar for 2009. In May, he's scheduled to visit Israel and the Palestinian Territories after a brief stop in Jordan.

*(Allen is NCR senior correspondent. His e-mail address is [jallen@ncronline.org](mailto:jallen@ncronline.org).)*

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John Allen is 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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