

Cameroon bishop backs pope on condoms

John L. Allen Jr. | Mar. 18, 2009

Seen through Western eyes, the Catholic church in Africa often presents an intriguing mix of deep conservatism on some issues — especially sexual morality — and remarkably progressive views on other matters, such as economic justice, peace, and the environment. Cameroon's Bishop George Nkubo, who heads the mostly English-speaking Kumbo diocese in the country's northwest, illustrates that mix. Commenting on day one of Pope Benedict XVI's first voyage to Africa, Nkubo strongly backed the pope's line on condoms and AIDS, insisting that in his rural diocese, the easy availability of condoms encourages promiscuity and a false sense of invulnerability. Only personal conversion, he argued, including sexual self-discipline, offers a long-term solution to the AIDS crisis. Yet in almost the same breath, Nkubo called upon the church in Cameroon, and across Africa, to be more outspoken in its opposition for the poor and its resistance to oppression. He also said that any bishop who does not offer concrete witness to solidarity with the poor is failing in his duties. Nkubo was among the bishops on hand to greet Benedict XVI this afternoon in Yaoundè, Cameroon's capital. Afterwards, Nkubo sat down for an interview with NCR.

Do you remember the visits of John Paul II to Cameroon in 1985 and 1995?

I remember the one in '85 especially well. I was a very young priest, just ordained. [Nkubo, 56, was ordained a priest in 1981 and a bishop in 2006.] That first visit was truly pastoral, in that the pope moved throughout the country. He touched different parts of the Cameroon church. He addressed young people, families, the intellectuals, and so on. Also, he was a young and vibrant pope then. Benedict is older, and more refined, if I can put it that way. John Paul was young, dynamic — it was like God come among us. I remember dashing through the crowd to grab his hand, and I thought to myself, "now I can die." I said that in the cathedral at the time. This pope is more reflective, and it will be a more reflective visit. We are more concerned that the Holy Father comes to address issues, issues of faith, in a way that penetrates, that has an impact on people's lives and on society.

What are the issues you hope Benedict XVI will address?

Of course, the visit is really meant to introduce the working document for the next synod on the church in Africa. It should focus on peace, justice and reconciliation, in Cameroon and across Africa. So far, I think he's off to a good start. His talk today at the airport was very good — without shaking Cameroonian society to bits, he definitely had some strong things to say. It was beautifully done, very careful, but clear. That's what people are looking for, that somehow he will reawaken in us a sense of Christian values that can have an impact on Cameroonian society.

The pope pointedly called upon Christians never to be silent about corruption and abuses of power, standing next to President Paul Biya — whose government is widely perceived as fairly corrupt and undemocratic. What did you think of that?

It was very courageous to say that, standing next to the president and other people in the government. You know, sometimes people point fingers at the church — I was on the radio this morning, and someone said, "You

churchmen are in a 'holy marriage' with the state, meaning that we condone too much, that we're not prophetic enough. I think there may be some truth to that. It was beautiful that the Holy Father said this - that's what the church should be, more and more.

The bishops of Cameroon have put out tough pastoral letters on corruption and other topics in the past.

Yes, that's true, although it was a long time ago. In general, we're not as strong as I would like to see. There's so much talk about corruption in Cameroon, and we have to address it. Incidentally, however, as I was waiting for the Holy Father this afternoon, I got a chance to talk with some top government officials. They don't deny that there's corruption in this country. To some extent they have a point when they say that a few corrupt officials have given everyone else in government a bad name. There are true, honest, dedicated, hard-working Cameroonians who do their jobs well. It's also true that the Cameroon government is willing sometimes to tackle those who have embezzled state money. Yet the reality still is, there is too much corruption. People may try to give reasons for it, but the truth is that there are those who steal because they have ready access to lots of public money. Maybe in his own modest, human way, the head of state [Biya] is trying to address that.

Do you think what the pope said this afternoon will make the church in Cameroon bolder?

There are individual bishops who are very strong, forceful. Cardinal Tumi, of course, speaks strongly about corruption and human rights. But I would like to see the church in Cameroon collectively, and especially the bishops' conference, be united and strong on social issues. I hope what the pope said will help. That's my wish, and my plea, but to be quite honest with you, a lot of work still has to be done. We as a conference, the church leaders, have to be convinced that there's something seriously wrong.

Why do you think the bishops don't speak with a united voice?

I suppose one of the reasons, from what I can see, is that when it comes to politics, we don't agree. We can agree on church teaching about the sacraments, about the Holy Father, and so on, but when it comes to politics things get a bit partisan. Of course that's not just a problem of the church in Cameroon, but it's something we have to address. Sometimes social connections, or other reasons, can lead to a sort of compromise. People prefer not to rock the boat. I'm not in way trying to betray the bishops' conference of Cameroon, but I do think the church can be much stronger addressing social issues. We've done it, but we can be stronger.

It should also be said that I know many, many church people in Cameroon, often in quiet but significant ways, who are incredibly dedicated to the option for the poor - for example, helping the sick, or working with people in difficult economic and family situations. They're doing outstanding work, and that is something to be reckoned with. I come from a very rural diocese and I see, every day, priests and religious who are very dedicated. As a bishop, they help remind me that if I do not really witness concretely [to solidarity with] the poor, I am failing in my duties.

There's a series of unsolved murders of priests, nuns, even an archbishop, in Cameroon. Why don't we know what happened?

I wouldn't restrict it to priests and nuns. I know of other cases too where people have died, we were told there would be an official investigation, and the results have never been publicized. We don't know whether [the killings] are part of a political approach to issues. Some of the priests who have died were among those who had openly spoken against the system. It may also be that these were people who know too much, and in order for the information not to be leaked, they were eliminated.

The official line is that there were robberies gone bad, but I know many Catholics here don't buy that, insisting that these people were killed to keep them silent. Do you believe that?

It certainly has been said, and in some of the cases I tend to believe it, although I don't have the facts to prove it. But what I think is this: A thorough investigation [of these killings] could be done, because it's been done in other places, and the facts could be publicized. If there were nothing to hide, then everything should be made known ? unless it's in someone's interest not to make things public. We have an efficient security system that can track people down, so we know this person was killed for that reason. If they don't do it in a particular case, you have to ask why not.

By now, you've heard about the pope's comments on condoms in response to a reporter's question. In a nutshell, he said that condoms should not be part of anti-AIDS programs, and that they can actually make the problem worse. This is probably a stupid question to ask a bishop, but do you agree with the pope?

I do agree with the pope, and I'm not saying that just because he's the pope. I live in area hit hard by the disease, and I have a very strong network in the diocese that tries to fight AIDS. An important part [of that fight] is our Family Life Center, which I think is an option that makes sense for the people where I live.

By that, you mean an option for ?family values? such as faithful marriage and abstinence outside marriage?

Yes. I have huge amounts of testimony that the display and the spread of condoms has only promoted promiscuity, at least in the part of the country where we are.

Because they make people feel invulnerable?

I think so, completely so. People believe that using them makes everything safe. ? Our effort, in the Family Life Center we've set up in the diocese, is to train people in responsible behavior. I think it yields fruit, and that's why I'm so convinced about it.

For the outside world, at least, it just seems like common sense that when you're dealing with an emergency, you should try everything ? including condoms.

This isn't about an emergency, but rather the values of a lifetime ? respect for life, respect for the human person. It has to do also with discipline, with education ? in the end, the solution [to the AIDS crisis] is conversion. If I'm converted, my whole life changes ? my relationship with God, with other people, and so on.

Some would argue that with 22 million Africans infected, and 1.5 million deaths every year, we need to use every tool in the toolbox ? and that while abstinence is a noble ideal, it just isn't practical.

[Using condoms] is an easy option, but we've got other options that I would rather present to the people. Also, it's been established scientifically that condoms themselves are not as safe as people imagine. I think the better option, the one we've taken, is teaching the people good discipline. Learning to orient your life in a moral way, ultimately, is the answer. It's very challenging, but it's the answer.

While in Cameroon, the pope will present the working document for the upcoming Synod for Africa. What are your hopes for that event?

I think one key thing is to call the people of Africa to be more committed to justice issues. It should begin back

in their local society, even in the family, teaching children to respect one another, to respect other's rights, to have a deep concern for one another. Also, to give to each person what is his due, so that we learn to share the many riches God has given us on the continent. We have to fight the evil forces, within and without, that keep people oppressed and permanently poor. We have to address the structures of sin, so that in Cameroon, both at a local level and a national level, we can see why our country is the way it is.

Some say Africa's underdevelopment is the result of outside forces ? the legacy of colonialism, unjust trading relationships with the West, and so on. Others blame mostly internal forces ? bad government, corruption, and the like. Obviously the right answer is ?both,? but do you have an opinion on which is more important?

Both have to be addressed at once, but I would say if internally we can begin to manage our affairs well, then we would be in a stronger position to face the common enemy without. If people are patriotic, if they really love their country, they would rally around and fight any evil forces that come in to drain our resources. Selfishness is what fails us ? it means that any opportunity people get to liaise with external forces for their own personal interests, they'll go for it. If the leaders of our countries unite in a patriotic way to develop our countries, to build the economy, and so on, they will fight the common enemy.

Talking to people on the streets, it's clear that expectations for this trip are very high. It's now been more than twenty years since the first papal visit to Cameroon. Looking back, can you say that John Paul's trip in 1985 actually changed anything?

I'm very convinced that it did. Spiritually, it raised awareness and made people take their faith seriously. It's the same today ? you may look at these crowds and say, ?It's just excitement, nothing more.? But I think that if the whole nation can come to a halt because a man like this has come, and they listen to him ? I think people will think twice when they go to sleep tonight. When they get up tomorrow, they will want to do something good ? even it's just for one moment, they'll want to do something that doesn't destroy our country but that develops it. If everyone were to do something good just for one minute, I think things can change.

Even from the point of view of the church, I can see beautiful changes, things happening. People feel that the pope coming to Cameroon makes us proud to live our faith. They think, ?I've listened to him, and I want to practice what he has taught.? Spiritually, somehow God touches their lives, their hearts, and they change. It also just makes the life of the community happy.

You spoke of the need for bishops to be more outspoken on social issues. Politically, does the pope's presence help you by giving you more visibility, and reminding people that you're part of this vast global church?

That's the great advantage the Catholic church has, that somehow it's both independent [of the state] and yet dependent [upon the pope]. We can speak out, because behind us stands not just that man, but everything the office [of the papacy] symbolizes. We know that we're defending universal principles, not just things peculiar to our local church. We have behind us a long tradition, a rich tradition, a universal tradition, which helps us go on. I'd like to see how we can tap that more, learning from other's experiences. [The visit] makes us feel that great bond of solidarity.

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