

Condemned by pope, witchcraft a reality in Africa

John L. Allen Jr. NCR Staff | Mar. 21, 2009



Angolans await the pope (CNS photo)

In Angola yesterday, Benedict XVI stressed social issues readily familiar to Western audiences, such as poverty, war, and human rights. Today, however, the pope turned to another burning concern across much of Africa, albeit one that can seem exotic to foreign ears: Witchcraft.

Many Africans, the pope said, "are living in fear of spirits, of malign and threatening powers. In their bewilderment, they end up even condemning street children and the elderly as alleged sorcerers."

Benedict called upon Catholics to "to proclaim that Christ has triumphed over death and all those occult powers."

The pope made the remarks during a Mass for bishops, priests, religious and catechists at São Paulo Church in Luanda, the Angolan capital.

For many in the Western world, "witchcraft" may seem a benign form of New Age spirituality; the chaplain's handbook for the U.S. military recognizes "Wicca," a modern form of witchcraft, as a legitimate religious practice.

Across Africa, however, things look very different. The working assumption is that magical powers are real, but they're demonic "a conviction that can have devastating consequences.

In Angola, children suffering from diseases such as malaria and AIDS, or street children, are sometimes accused of practicing witchcraft and subjected to abuse. In 2006, a three-year-old HIV-positive child was suspected of placing a curse on his parents, so neighbors abandoned the child in a coop, where chickens pecked out one of his eyes. Between 2001 and 2005, 423 children accused of witchcraft sought refuge at the Santa Child Centre run by the Catholic Church in M'banza Congo, the capital of Zaire Province, on the border with the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Similar ferment happens in other countries.

In Nigeria, for example, an elderly woman was beheaded in 2007 after she was accused of placing a curse on another tribe. In turn, her murder triggered a spate of inter-ethnic killing that left 80 dead. Secretive cults on Nigeria's 100 university campuses, with names such as "Black Axes" and "Pyrates," often practice juju, or black magic, to terrify their rivals, and violent struggles between these cults have left hundreds dead in recent years.

Also in 2007, a gang of villagers in Kenya beat an 81-year-old man to death, suspecting him of having murdered his three grandsons through witchcraft.

Even after converting to Christianity, many Africans keep one foot in this cluster of beliefs and practices rooted in traditional African spirituality.

Fr. Patrick Lafon, former secretary general of the bishops' conference in Cameroon, said many Catholics may show up for Mass on Sunday, but if there's sickness in the family, they'll also consult their tribal medicine man to find out who placed the curse and what they need to do to lift it. He called that evidence of "insufficient catechesis and insufficient inculturation."

Some critics say the Catholic church in Africa has yet to work out an effective pastoral response.

In February 2007, the Catholic University of East Africa in Nairobi, Kenya, held a three-day symposium on witchcraft. Experts warned that witchcraft is "destroying" the Catholic Church in Africa, in part because skeptical, Western-educated clergy don't take the beliefs behind it seriously.

"It is important for the Church to understand the fears of the people, and not to attribute them to superstition," said Michael Katola, a lecturer in pastoral theology. "Witchcraft is a reality; it is not a superstition. Many communities know these powers exist."

Katola warned that inadequate pastoral responses are driving some Africans into Pentecostalism.

"Many of our Christians seek deliverance, healing and exorcism from other denominations because priests do not realize they have redemptive powers," he said. "If we don't believe in the existence of witchcraft as Satanism, then we cannot deal with it."

Sr. Bibiana Munini Ngundo said that the Catholic Church has not paid sufficient attention to "integral healing," leading people to put their trust in diviners and magicians. Fr. Clement Majawa of Malawi listed 14 categories of witchcraft practiced in Africa, and argued that the Church's denial "only escalates the problem."

"Since Christ in the gospels encountered the devil, it is proper for Christians to accept the reality of witchcraft," Majawa said.

In his remarks today, Benedict XVI alluded to one reason why the church has sometimes been reluctant to challenge witchcraft: an exaggerated "live and let live" spirit of tolerance.

‘Someone may object: ‘Why not leave them in peace? They have their truth, and we have ours,?’ the pope said.

In the end, Benedict said, such timidity does no one any favors.

‘If we are convinced that, without Christ, life lacks something, that something real – indeed, the most real thing of all – is missing, we must also be convinced that we do no injustice to anyone if we present Christ to them,’ the pope said. ‘Indeed, we must do this. It is our duty to offer everyone this possibility of attaining eternal life.’

The pope returned to more familiar ground for Westerners later in the day, in a massive session for Angolan youth in Luanda’s Dos Coqueros Stadium. Among other things, Benedict alluded to the legacy of Angola’s bloody civil war from 1975 to 2002, which left an estimated 500,000 dead, hundreds of thousands more injured and maimed, and a vast population of refugees and displaced persons.

‘Even in our midst, I see some of the many thousands of young Angolans who have been maimed or disabled as a result of the war and the landmines,’ the pope said.

‘I think of the countless tears that have been shed for the loss of your relatives and friends. It is not hard to imagine the dark clouds that still veil the horizon of your fondest hopes and dreams.’

Facing those ‘dark clouds,’ Benedict told Angolan youth that ‘the power to shape the future is within you.’

Tomorrow, Benedict will celebrate an open-air Mass in Luanda before meeting in the afternoon with movements involved in fighting for women’s rights. On Monday, Benedict XVI will return to Rome. His next foreign voyage will come in May, when he travels to Jordan, Israel and the Palestinian Territories.

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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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