

Avoiding 'condom-gate' in Africa

John L. Allen Jr. | Nov. 4, 2011 All Things Catholic

In two weeks Pope Benedict XVI will make his second visit to Africa, spending Nov. 18-20 in the West African nation of Benin. No one from the Vatican has asked me for advice on the trip, but I'm going to offer some here anyway.

In a nutshell, it's this: Try to handle the condoms question more artfully. It would be nice if the pope's second outing to Africa isn't utterly capsized by the latest round of 'condom-gate.'

To be concrete, I'll volunteer three thoughts on a communications strategy.

- Don't pretend the pope can go to Africa and duck questions about condoms and AIDS, especially because he's muddied the waters himself with some recent comments. But also don't pretend that he can just toss off a few casual remarks without inviting a media frenzy.
- Make sure whatever Benedict says is presented in a way, and at a time, that doesn't overshadow other storylines about Africa that deserve to register in the West.
- Also ensure the presentation doesn't make the pope look isolated, but rather gets across that he's reflecting a broad religious consensus in Africa, as well as the conclusions of many secular experts. People may still contest whatever he says, but at least they won't be able to caricature him as an octogenarian European crank.

To grasp the relevance of that advice, let's take a stroll down memory lane to the last time Benedict was in Africa, visiting Cameroon and Angola in March 2009.

Heading in to that trip, Vatican officials said Benedict wanted to use it to tell a 'good news' story, focusing especially on the mind-blowing growth of Catholicism on the continent. The pope also wanted to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with African Catholics in their struggle for social change, especially the fight against corruption. He memorably did so in Cameroon. On a platform next to strongman President Paul Biya, a former Catholic seminarian who presides over a regime once rated by Transparency International as the most corrupt on earth, the pope said, 'In the face of corruption or abuse of power, a Christian can never remain silent.'

For Africans, that image of the pope speaking truth to power was the key moment of the trip. In Europe and the United States, however, most people had no idea it ever happened, because coverage was instead dominated by the 'Great Condoms Debate.'

To recap, Benedict spoke briefly to reporters aboard the papal plane en route to Cameroon, and took the inevitable question facing any pope on an African outing: What about condoms and AIDS? Famously, Benedict said, 'The problem cannot be overcome by the distribution of condoms: on the contrary, they increase it.'

In truth, he said more than that. His full response ran to 263 words, including the importance of solidarity with the suffering. If you understand papal argot, it comes off as a nuanced case for compassion, as opposed to a

?just say no? exercise in moralism.

Nonetheless, the sound-bite quoted above was beaten like a cheap drum, and predictably let slip the dogs of cultural war. For the first time ever, a European parliament (in this case, Belgium) formally censured the pope, and Spain's left-wing government under Prime Minister Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero dispatched a million condoms to Africa in protest.

As a result of the fracas, no other story about the trip ever saw the light of day. One can blame the press for missing the big picture, but the truth is that the Vatican should have seen it coming. Did anyone imagine that if the pope said what he did, without any context or background, it wouldn't blot everything else out of the sky?

At the time, the Vatican made almost no effort to get three key points across, so they didn't surface until much later in the news cycle ? too late to make any difference.

First, the pope was simply giving voice to what Catholic bishops in Africa have been telling him for decades. African prelates usually say the condoms that arrive in Africa are often cheap and unreliable, and anyway, simply passing them out without education and moral formation sometimes encourages people to engage in even riskier behaviors. You can contest that, but it's far from a peculiar papal hobbyhorse.

Second, other religious leaders in Africa hold the same view. The day after the "Great Condoms Debate" broke out, I interviewed the imam of the national mosque in Cameroon's capital. When I asked him what he made of it, the imam said: "My only regret is that the pope didn't wait to say it until he got here, so we could have said it together."

Third, some secular anti-AIDS experts think the pope's got a point. Edward Green of Harvard published an op-ed in the Washington Post three days later with data showing that nations which use the "ABC" approach, stressing abstinence and fidelity alongside condoms, have had more success bringing down infection rates.

In sum, the trip of 2009 produced two communications meltdowns: The full message Benedict wanted to deliver in Africa was obscured, and a false impression of Benedict as isolated and out-of-touch on a critically important issue was allowed to fester.

There's every reason to believe the condoms question will come up again in Benin. HIV/AIDS has hardly disappeared, and the pope has actually courted confusion about where he now stands. In a 2010 book-length interview, Benedict said that condoms, while not a "real or moral solution" to AIDS, can nevertheless be a "first step in the direction of moralization."

That line, coupled with a subsequent Vatican clarification, left many observers scratching their heads about what exactly the pope is trying to say ? not to mention what the implications might be for Catholics on the front lines of anti-AIDS efforts in places such as Africa.

Given that background, the question is clearly on the table. The drama lies in how it'll be handled.

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The point of encouraging a more effective communications approach isn't simply, or even primarily, about protecting the pope's image. He's a big boy, and few figures on the Catholic stage have more experience handling the slings and arrows of public incomprehension than Benedict XVI.

Instead, what's at stake is what economists call "opportunity cost." A papal trip to Africa is a precious chance, if it's not wasted, to shine a spotlight on a continent that usually registers in the West only when there's a

famine or a war. Even then, you can't take anything for granted. The Second Congo War and its aftermath cost an estimated 5.4 million lives from 1998 to 2008, the deadliest conflict of the 20th century after World War II, and it might as well have been on Mars in terms of how much the typical European or American knows about it.

The key question about Benedict's outing to Benin is not, therefore, how the condoms question will play. It's this: If the Vatican manages to avoid that trap, what other storylines might draw some interest?

At least three come to mind.

Catholicism in Africa

I've quoted this statistic many times, but it bears repeating. The Catholic population of sub-Saharan Africa shot up from 1.9 million in 1900 to 139 million in 2000, a growth rate of almost 7,000 percent – the greatest spurt of missionary expansion the Catholic church has ever enjoyed. As a result, many African Catholics believe their historical moment has come.

Catholicism in Africa enjoys many strengths: Youthful energy and dynamism, a vibrant religiosity not (at least, not yet) corroded by secularism, a tradition of serving as a voice of conscience in public affairs, an intriguing experience of engaging Islam as a rough equal rather than a subaltern, and a pattern of relationships inside the church not (again, not yet) infected by ideological polarization.

Yet it also faces hard questions. To what extent do tribal and kinship bonds still trump a common identity as Catholics? Is the fairly clerical model of leadership in some places adequate for mobilizing an increasingly educated and sophisticated laity? Is Catholicism in Africa being weakened by shipping off some of its best and brightest young priests to the West, trading short-term revenue for long-term pastoral health? Will the vibrant religiosity of Africa endure as African societies become ever more part of a global village? Can African Catholics respect indigenous spirituality and belief, without baptizing paganism and witchcraft? Can Africa avoid repeating the mistakes of the church in America and Europe on the sexual abuse crisis?

Answers to those questions will go a long way toward determining whether the 21st century really does present an "African moment" in Catholic life.

Benedict XVI is travelling to Benin in part to unveil an "Apostolic Exhortation", containing conclusions he drew from the October 2009 Synod of Bishops for Africa. In theory, the document should express a sort of game plan for the Catholic future on the continent.

This ought to be a Catholic equivalent of Bush's speech to Congress after 9/11, or Obama rolling out his jobs plan – in other words, a highly anticipated make-or-break moment. If the pope presents a compelling vision, the document ought to be celebrated. If he recycles the usual verbiage without really advancing the conversation, it ought to be criticized – pulled apart in public debate and put back together again.

Either way, this is one exhortation that ought to matter.

Engaging other Believers

Benedict's presence in Benin also presents an opportunity to examine how Catholicism engages other belief systems, including some with vast footprints which normally don't command much Catholic attention, either from the church's caste of experts in inter-religious dialogue or from ecclesiastical officialdom.

For one thing, the Vodun faith – better known in the West as "voodoo" – originated in this part of Africa, with some experts seeing Benin as a primary crucible. In Benin today, an estimated 18 percent of the population,

which translates into 1.6 million people, are practitioners of voodoo, making it the third largest religious group in the country after Catholics and Muslims ? and many of those Catholics and Muslims hold on to a sizeable share of beliefs and customs which have their origin in voodoo.

So what? Well, consider this.

Today, there are 75 million Methodists in the world, and that number is in steady decline. Though accurate counts are harder to come by for voodoo, estimates range from 30 to 60 million, and rising ? in other words, a comparable pool of people. Over the centuries Catholicism has invested far more time and treasure understanding Methodism than voodoo, and you could make a good argument that it's time to balance the scales.

If you're the kind of Catholic inclined to dialogue, the argument would be that we need to reach out to this long-neglected religious group. If you're more concerned with apologetics and Catholic identity, then the case would be that the church needs to understand voodoo better in order to protect Catholics from being seduced by it. Either way, surely it merits as much thought as we're giving the Methodists.

In a similar vein, Benin is also a great laboratory for engaging the vast phenomenon of independent, non-denominational Christianity, often meaning storefront churches that blend elements of Pentecostal and Evangelical spirituality ? a panorama which includes scores of African-initiated churches. According to the Atlas of Global Christianity, the ?independents? today represent 16 percent of the global Christian total, some 369 million people.

It's tough to imagine any serious effort toward Christian unity that doesn't bring these folks into focus, and Benin happens to be home to one of the largest independent bodies: the Celestial Church of Christ, founded in 1947 by a local carpenter, Samuel Joseph Bilewu Oschoffa, who claimed to have experienced a divine revelation during a solar eclipse, and who believed that God had graced him with the ability to heal and raise the dead. There are more than a half-million ?Celestials? in Benin, with a strong following also in Nigeria and outposts around the world (including the United States, with headquarters in Ewing, New Jersey.)

Catholics everywhere should be interested in how the local church in Benin thinks about the Celestials, and what relations in the trenches are like.

Finally, Benin is also a good example of what some experts regard as a distinctive form of ?African Islam,? deeply traditional in ethos, yet largely untainted by the radical currents that loom large elsewhere. Christians and Muslims in sub-Saharan Africa enjoy a position of rough equality, neither one clearly dominating the other. As a result, African Christians and Muslims have had to work out a variety of different *modi vivendi* ? often informally, on the ground, without pondering all the theological and constitutional fine points ? which could offer fodder for reflection in other parts of the world.

It's striking that the President of Benin, a former banker named Thomas Boni Yayi, is a Muslim convert to Evangelical Christianity. In other societies with a strong Muslim presence, that could be a source of conflict, as some Muslims regard conversion as a form of apostasy. Yet for the most part, Benin has managed to avoid the Christian/Muslim violence that has sometimes gripped its larger neighbor, Nigeria.

Maybe, if the world's attention isn't diverted by a flap over condoms, somebody during this trip will think to ask why that is.

Social justice concerns

Benin also presents an opportunity to focus on a couple of the most burning social justice issues facing Africa.

First is the struggle against corruption. If you ask the typical African activist, she or he will tell you that reducing corruption is a sine qua non of any other social justice effort. In a recent World Bank survey, more than 150 high-ranking public officials and analysts from over 60 developing nations ranked corruption as the biggest impediment to economic development and growth. Estimates of the total cost of corruption worldwide are in the neighborhood of \$500 billion to \$1 trillion, easily dwarfing the total amount spent by Western nations on overseas development assistance.

Benin is a great case in point, as the country was rocked just last year by Africa's equivalent of the Bernie Madoff scandal. The meltdown of an investment house called "ICC Services," which turned out to be running a ponzi scheme with the life savings of thousands of small investors, drained away five percent of Benin's GDP, more than \$330 million. All this in a country where 88 percent of the population lacks adequate health care, where more than 20 percent of children are undernourished, and where just 23 percent of the adult female population is literate (as opposed to almost 50 percent of men).

As it happens, several politicians in Benin caught up in the ICC Services scandal turned out to be members of the Celestial Church of Christ, who apparently used their church contacts to spread the ponzi scheme to nations such as Ivory Coast and Burkina Faso. The church's leader died of a heart attack around the same time, which was widely attributed to stress caused by the affair.

The question to be asked is what effect, if any, a Christian formation actually has on producing a new generation of leaders, more inclined to think about the common good than lining their own pockets.

A second social justice question about Benin is whether the country can avoid the "resource trap" that has afflicted so many other developing nations with substantial deposits of natural resources, especially oil.

Benin is situated on the oil-rich Gulf of Guinea, cheek by jowl with Africa's leading oil-producer, Nigeria. The conventional estimate is that Benin has potential reserves of five billion barrels of oil, worth about \$400 billion at today's prices. When you consider that Benin's entire GDP in 2009 was \$6 billion, you get some sense of how mammoth a potential windfall that estimate would represent.

Preliminary surveys also suggest that Benin has sizeable deposits of iron ore, gold, limestone, marble, and agrominerals such as phosphates, most of which are still largely untapped.

If those resources are to serve the common good — as opposed to enriching foreign companies and a handful of local elites, the familiar pattern in so many other places — there needs to be a robust public debate about how those resources should be used, as well as an ongoing focus on accountability. Given the central role the Catholic church plays in national affairs, Catholics will have to be in the front lines, and that's hardly a point that applies only in Benin.

Once again, if we manage to avoid condom-gate, there's a chance the pope's presence might prompt the Catholic world to chew over that challenge.

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