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The lonely liberation theology of Benedict XVI

by John L. Allen Jr.

NCR Today

Cotonou, Benin -- Anyone just tuning in now to Pope Benedict XVI, who doesn't know much about him but somehow caught wind of his Nov. 18-20 trip to Benin, could be forgiven a bit of confusion about exactly what the pope came here to say about the political role of Catholicism in Africa.

Understanding that a unique form of "liberation theology" circulates in the pope's intellectual and spiritual bloodstream can, perhaps, help make sense of things.

(?Liberation theology? usually refers to a progressive theological movement pioneered in Latin America in the 1960s and 70s, which put the church on the side of the poor in their political struggles, and which drew both praise and rebuke from the future pope while he was the Vatican's doctrinal czar.)

On the one hand, Benedict repeatedly cried out in defense of the poor. During an open-air Mass this morning in a soccer stadium in Benin's capital, before some 40,000 wildly enthusiastic, dancing and singing locals (with another 40,000 outside) he said "Jesus wanted to identify himself with the poor" and the poor deserve respect because "through them, God shows us the way to Heaven."

Yesterday, in a highly anticipated speech at Benin's Presidential Palace, Benedict sounded at times like a populist reformer.

"There are too many scandals and injustices, too much corruption and greed, too many errors and lies, too much violence which leads to misery and death," he said.

In his major document on the faith in Africa, *Africae Munus*, or "Africa's Commitment," Benedict called the church to act as a "sentinel," denouncing situations of injustice.

The pontiff also took yet another swipe at neo-con ideologies. In his opening speech of the trip, he warned Africans that an "unconditional surrender to the laws of the market and of finance" is among the pathologies of modernity they would do well to avoid.

Yet Benedict XVI also issued a clear warning to stay out of politics, which could seem at odds with his biting social commentary. While he rejected "withdrawal" and "escape from concrete historical responsibility," he explicitly instructed clergy to steer clear of "immediate engagement with politics."

The pope likewise stressed that "the church's mission is not political in nature." At another point, he added that, "Christ does not propose a revolution of a social or political kind."

So, what's going on? When Benedict talks about defense of the poor, is he engaging in pious rhetoric without any real-world bite? Is this just papal double-talk, tossing a bone to the church's progressive constituency in one breath and its more traditional following in another?

In fact, the tension can be resolved with this insight: Benedict XVI has a distinctive form of liberation theology, and his various speeches and texts in Africa amount to vintage expressions of it.

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This "Benedictine" form of liberation theology is rooted in three basic convictions.

- The supernatural realm is the deepest and most "real" level of existence. Material forms of reality, including economic and political structures, are fundamentally conditioned by the quality of humanity's relationship with God.
- Individual transformation must precede social transformation. Systems and structures cannot be liberated if the individual human heart doesn't change first.
- Attempts by the church to dictate political solutions end in disaster, among other things performing a disservice to the poor by reducing the social appetite for God. Preoccupied with secularism as he is, Benedict XVI knows well that rejection of religious faith in the West is, at least in part, a reaction against centuries of theocracy and clerical privilege.

Add it up, and what you get is this: Benedict XVI is genuinely scandalized by poverty and injustice, and he wants the church to be a change agent. In terms of how the church promotes transformation, however, it's not by lobbying or electoral strategy, but by inviting people into relationship with Christ — the Christ whose "preferential love for the poor" Benedict has repeatedly confirmed.

Nurture love for Christ in the hearts of women and men, the pope believes, and the revolution will come. Trying to start with the revolution first, he believes, is a recipe for heartache, which the tragic history of the 20th century eloquently illustrates.

That's the liberation theology of Benedict XVI. It is, in some ways, a fairly lonely position, satisfying neither the zeal for concrete political advocacy of the Catholic left nor the *laissez-faire* instincts of at least part of the Catholic right.

It's also not clear how Benedict's version of liberation theology will play in Africa itself, where religious leaders are accustomed to playing a robustly political role because the churches are often the only zones of life where civil society can take shape — the only safe environments in which dissent can be expressed,

and where the power of the state doesn't (at least, doesn't always) reach.

Ironically, Benin itself is a good example of the point. This is a country where one former Archbishop of Cotonou, Isidore de Sousa, received special permission from the John Paul II to act as the effective leader of the country in the early 1990s, leading it through a transition from Marxism to democracy.

In an interview yesterday with NCR, Archbishop John Onaiyekan of Abuja, Nigeria, called the tension between emphasizing a spiritual or a political mission as a "false dilemma."

"It's not as if you can't be politically relevant if you don't enter politics," Onaiyekan said.

However Benedict's liberation theology takes shape in Africa or other parts of the world, bringing it into focus at least has the virtue of rendering his various messages throughout this three-day journey consistent: Defend the poor, yes, but using the spiritual arsenal of the church.

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Benedict wraps up his Benin trip today, his second journey to Africa as pope and the 22nd overseas journey of his papacy.

Benedict's Mass this morning drew the largest crowd of his three-day itinerary, with locals filling the downtown stadium for hours prior to the pope's arrival. They passed the time in song and dance, and cheering every appearance of the sun out of fear that rain might mar the pope's event. (In the end, a brilliant sun alternated with clouds.)

Cheers also went up when, roughly an hour before the Mass began, there was a brief glimpse of the moon in the sky, which according to local tradition is seen as a blessing.

According to organizers, some 1,500 priests and 180 bishops took part in the Mass, with representative from 36 bishops conferences across Africa.

Throughout the last three days, enthusiastic faithful have thronged the streets to mark the pope's passage. Though temperatures have been in the high 80s, with strong humidity, Vatican spokesperson Fr. Federico Lombardi said yesterday that the 84-year-old pontiff is "doing well" and has handled the heat without notable difficulty.

After this morning's service, Benedict was scheduled to lunch with the African bishops who make up the Special Council of the Synod for Africa. He was then to take part in a brief farewell ceremony with Benin's President Thomas Boni Yayi at the international airport in Cotonou, named in honor of the late Cardinal Bernardin Gantin, at whose tomb Benedict prayed yesterday in the coastal city of Ouidah.

After the farewell, Benedict XVI was to return to Rome. The Benin trip marks the final papal journey of 2011, following earlier outings to Croatia, Germany, and Spain. Next year, tentative plans call for Benedict to visit Mexico and Cuba.

[John L. Allen Jr. is NCR senior correspondent. His e-mail address is jallen@ncronline.org.]

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