

Hard questions about Pope Benedict in Africa

John L. Allen Jr. | Nov. 23, 2011 All Things Catholic

Benedict XVI said he came to Benin, a country of eight million in West Africa, to deliver a message of hope. Throughout the Nov. 18-20 trip, he repeatedly invoked the image of Africa as a "spiritual lung" for humanity, praising its deeply religious worldview and stressing that the joy, resilience and traditional moral values of Africa are precious gifts to the world.

It may seem counterintuitive that an 84-year-old German intellectual should be the Western leader most enthusiastic about Africa, yet it actually makes all the sense in the world. Spiritually speaking, Africa is a superpower -- both the world's largest manufacturer and consumer of religion. For a pope who has spent a lifetime lamenting the "death of God" in Europe, Africa can't help but seem an oasis of vibrant faith.

Africans seemed to return the sentiment.

Vast crowds, including large numbers of children and young people, thronged the streets of Cotonou, Benin's capital, and Ouidah, on the Atlantic coast, to see the pope. For Benedict's open-air Mass in a Cotonou soccer stadium Sunday, there were at least as many people outside as the 40,000 who made their way inside, spending several hours dancing and singing before the main event. Observers compared the turnout (which also drew people from neighboring countries such as Togo, Ghana, Nigeria, Burkina Faso and Niger) to papal outings to Poland and Mexico.

Perhaps the most eloquent tribute came Saturday morning at Benin's presidential palace. Chancellor Koubourath Osseni, a Muslim woman, hailed Benedict XVI as "an authentic friend of Africa."

The aging pontiff certainly passed the stamina test. The temperature over the weekend was consistently in the high 80s, with extremely strong humidity, and Benedict often had to face that climate in heavy liturgical garb. He held up well, perhaps another testament to his fondness for the venue.

Yet popes don't travel just to be a cheerleader. The three-day trip to Benin, the pope's second outing to Africa and the 22nd overseas journey of his papacy, was also meant to get some business done.

The official motive was to present the conclusions from a 2009 Synod of Bishops for Africa, which Benedict did in the form of a 138-page document titled *Africae Munus*, or "Africa's Commitment," sort of a game plan for the faith on the continent. Benedict also delivered a series of speeches, including a highly anticipated address to political and religious leaders gathered in Benin's presidential palace, touted as the pope's most developed thinking on the social and political life of the continent.

Given all that, it's important to ask a few hard questions about what Benedict XVI intended to accomplish, and how well he pulled it off.

1. Did Benedict avoid the condoms trap?

The pope's last outing to Africa in 2009 was utterly dominated by debate over his suggestion, made to reporters aboard the papal plane, that condoms make the problem of HIV/AIDS worse. That triggered round one of "condom-gate." Round two came last year, when Benedict seemed to suggest in a book-length interview that condoms, while far from ideal, may nevertheless be a "first step" toward morality if they express a desire to save someone's life.

Despite a subsequent Vatican clarification and oceans of commentary, the key question appeared to be left hanging: Does that mean the church could quietly tolerate, if not approve, of the use of condoms to resist the spread of the disease -- even if it falls short of what Catholicism would regard as a fully moral solution?

There was no repeat of "condom-gate," for the simple reason that Benedict avoided the subject altogether. He briefly touched on AIDS in *Africae Munus*, stressing abstinence outside marriage and fidelity inside it as the best approach to prevention, and also called for aggressive research and wider availability of anti-AIDS medicines at lower costs.

(There was a brief ferment around Benedict's opening line on AIDS in *Africae Munus*, in which he writes that "the problem of AIDS clearly calls for a medical and pharmaceutical response." Some wondered if the term "medical" could be an oblique reference to condoms, but Vatican officials quietly made clear it meant anti-retroviral treatments and research directed at a cure.)

Those inclined to a glass-half-empty view might say that Benedict missed an opportunity to clarify his thinking -- in effect, that he ducked the condoms question in the region of the world where it's most burning. The glass-half-full view would be that by avoiding the condoms trap, Benedict at least ensured that other storylines about Africa stood a fighting chance to see the light of day.

2. Could a Eurocentric pope connect with Africa?

The charge of being "Eurocentric" continues to dog Benedict, despite the fact that he's now traveled outside Europe seven times, visiting every continent so far except Asia. Just days before he left for Benin, veteran Italian journalist Marco Politi published a book analyzing the "crisis" of his papacy, arguing that Benedict is insufficiently attentive to the "global and geopolitical" dimensions of his role.

In truth, the question of Benedict's ability to connect with Africa should have been settled two years ago. In Yaounde, Cameroon, in March 2009, he stood next to longtime President Paul Biya, whose regime was once rated the most corrupt on earth, and bluntly said that "Christians must never remain silent in the face of corruption and the abuse of power." That iconic moment was perceived by most Africans as one of the most relevant things they'd heard in a long time.

Alas, condom-gate meant few people outside Africa paid attention, so we're asking the same questions about Benin. For the record, Benedict seemed to connect just fine this time around, too.

If you were to poll African Catholic bishops, theologians, and lay activists about their most pressing social concerns, the two themes that would probably finish at the top would be the struggle against corruption and interreligious tolerance. Those were precisely the notes Benedict struck in his Nov. 19 speech at the presidential palace in Cotonou.

On the social justice front, Benedict's language was almost plaintive.

"Human beings aspire to liberty," he said, "then to live in dignity; they want good schools and food for their children, dignified hospitals to take care of the sick; they want to be respected; they demand transparent

governance which does not confuse private and public interests; and above all, they desire peace and justice."

"At this time, 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 to death," the pope said, calling political and economic leaders to face choices "they can no longer avoid."

Corruption is an especially topical theme. The pope's words carried local resonance in Benin, a country rocked last year by its own Bernie Madoff scandal in the form of a ponzi scheme perpetrated by one of the country's major investment houses. The "ICC Services" meltdown drained 5 percent of Benin's GDP, costing thousands of small investors more than \$330 million.

It's also worth noting that in his remarks to the pope, President Thomas Boni Yayi of Benin referred to completing his "second and final" term. While the constitution of Benin limits the president to two terms, there's been speculation that Boni might follow the lead of other African strongmen and try to jury-rig an amendment to extend his stay in power.

Boni's comments Saturday seem to suggest that's not the case. As a reporter for a local paper put it, "He said it, and he said it in the presence of the Holy Father. Now he's stuck with it."

One thus could consider Boni's statement as a sort of "first fruit" of the pope's call for good government.

Benedict was equally forceful on interreligious relations.

"Everyone of good sense understands that a serene and respectful dialogue about cultural and religious differences must be promoted," he said. "No religion, and no culture may justify appeal or recourse to intolerance and violence."

"Aggression," the pope said, "is an outmoded relational form which appeals to superficial and ignoble instincts."

Strikingly, in *Africae Munus*, Benedict called upon the church "in every situation, to persist in esteem for Muslims." That's especially relevant in light of two bits of context: First, growing resentment in church circles over anti-Christian persecution in some Muslim societies; and second, the fact that many African Catholic leaders don't approve of what they see as the overly deferential approach to Islam of the church in the Middle East, and want a feistier, more assertive dialogue.

Yet there was also a notable omission from Benedict's interreligious agenda.

On Saturday, he traveled to Ouidah on Benin's Atlantic coast, more or less the Vatican of voodoo. Historically, Benin has been the cradle of voodoo in West Africa, and it remains a huge presence. A famed python temple is right across the street from Ouidah's Basilica of the Immaculate Conception, a reminder of how Catholicism and voodoo live cheek by jowl.

One might think the trip afforded a chance to open lines of communication with a religious movement that enjoys a vast following, estimated at between 30 million and 60 million people worldwide -- comparable to the global footprint of, say, Methodism.

Yet Benedict never made any reference to voodoo, and didn't meet a priest or other exponent. His rhetoric in Ouidah, asserting that Christianity represents a triumph over "occultism and evil spirits," was taken by some as a swipe. That produced some resentment in a country that's proud of its unique religious heritage -- Jan. 10, for instance, is marked as "voodoo day."

What happened? I suspect that in subtle fashion, the ghost of Pope John Paul II's 1993 trip to Benin hung over

this weekend.

That 1993 outing coincided with a major national reawakening of voodoo in Benin, expressed in a movement called "Ouidah 92." John Paul met with leaders of traditional African religions and shook hands with a voodoo priest, with a picture of the meeting published on the front page of *L'Osservatore Romano*. To this day, that photo circulates in traditional Catholic circles as evidence of the late pope's alleged heterodoxy (along with images of him in an Assisi prayer circle, and kissing a Qur'an).

My hunch is that memories of that controversy almost two decades ago had a chilling effect on this trip, especially at a time when the Vatican is attempting to heal a schism with the traditionalist Society of St. Pius X. One can appreciate the concern, but the lack of any engagement with voodoo still represents a missed opportunity.

3. Will the pope's plan for Africa make any difference?

If the heart of this trip was to present *Africae Munus*, the conclusions from the 2009 Synod for Africa, then it's reasonable to ask if the document seems poised to actually make any difference in the African church. That's an especially compelling question given that the massive growth of Catholicism in Africa has led many experts to predict an "African moment" in the global church in the 21st century.

Boiled down to the essentials, Benedict XVI's message in *Africae Munus* can be expressed in two basic points:

- "Stay spiritual" -- in the sense of not allowing the church to become an explicitly political movement or party.
- "Stay Catholic" -- in the sense of not succumbing to an excessively "African" form of inculturation, one that ends up baptizing nationalism, tribalism, or heterodox religious beliefs and practices.

How well the church responds to those pleas remains to be seen, but Benedict at least seems to be reading the situation accurately. Africa is a place where religious leaders are often drawn into explicitly political activity because they're seen as moral leaders who enjoy far more public trust than most politicians. It's also a place where the tug of indigenous cultures, including their spiritual practices, remains strong.

As one application of the second point, about "staying Catholic," Benedict asked the bishops to conduct a study of traditional Africa reconciliation practices, rooted in tribal religion -- in part to learn from them, but also in part to stress that they cannot replace individual confession. If the bishops can figure out a way to honor traditional cultural beliefs while still upholding the character of the sacrament, it would be an indication that Benedict's vision is taking root.

Here's another possible acid test: Benedict stressed that if the Catholic church is to preach good governance and the fight against corruption to Africa's political and economic leaders, it must practice good government itself in the way it manages its own resources. The question is, will Catholic leaders in Africa actually take that to heart?

Speaking to Africa's bishops, Benedict writes: "To make your message credible, see to it that your dioceses become models in the conduct of personnel, in transparency and good financial management."

"Do not hesitate to seek help from experts in auditing, so as to give a good example to the faithful and to society at large," the pope writes.

At another point, Benedict insists that church employees must receive "just remuneration ... in order to strengthen the church's credibility." He also directs a similar message to church-affiliated health care institutions, insisting that "the management of grant monies must aim at transparency."

I spoke on Nov. 19 to one leading African prelate, Archbishop John Oaniyekan of Abuja, Nigeria, who seemed optimistic that the bishops would act on the pope's injunction.

"Many bishops already take this very seriously, and because it's in the pope's exhortation, many more will do so," he said.

4. Did Benedict break any new ground?

In some ways, it may be unfair to expect an octogenarian who's been in the public eye his entire adult life, and who's been to Africa before, to come up with some breathtaking new declaration or initiative. That said, there were a few new touches worth noting.

Africae Munus contains perhaps the strongest papal rhetoric ever recorded on the problem of illiteracy, which Benedict compared to the pandemics afflicting Africa and called a form of "social death." His language on the empowerment of women was also striking, insisting that the church has a duty to promote a social role for women "equal to that of men."

Benedict also included a special meeting with children on his itinerary, reflecting the continent's overwhelmingly youthful demographics. Almost half of Africa's total population is under the age of 14.

At the big-picture level, however, perhaps the most novel feature of the trip wasn't anything Benedict said or did, but how the African context threw a striking feature of his thought into sharp relief: what I've termed his "lonely liberation theology."

I published a piece on this subject Sunday, but here are the highlights.

Benedict's two Africa trips have occasioned some of his sharpest social commentary. Both in 2009 and this time, the pontiff decried poverty and injustice, denounced corruption, and clearly aligned the church with hopes for political change. (His most biting sound bite came Friday in Benin, when he rejected "unconditional surrender to the laws of the market and finance.") At the same time, he's also told local clergy to stay out of politics and insisted that the church has no political solutions to propose.

What renders those two positions coherent is that Benedict is operating out of his own version of liberation theology. (That's a reference to the theological movement pioneered in Latin America in the 1960s and '70s, which sought to place the church on the side of the poor.)

Benedict's twist on 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 concrete political solutions end in disaster, among other things performing a disservice to the poor by reducing the social appetite for God. Anyone as preoccupied with secularism as Benedict XVI can't help but realize that the widespread rejection of religious faith in parts of the West today 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.

If the old slogan was, "If you want peace, work for justice," Benedict's version might be "If you want justice, go to church."

This doesn't mean, of course, that new political solutions aren't urgently necessary. What it means is that the particular contribution of the church is to lay the spiritual and moral foundations for those solutions by forming people of real faith and moral conviction, and constantly speaking out when the realities of the world don't correspond to the vision of the gospel.

I call this a "lonely" position because in some ways it doesn't fully satisfy anybody. It doesn't embrace the zeal of the Catholic left for direct political activism, nor does it reflect the *laissez-faire* ideological instincts of at least part of the Catholic right.

To what extent this "Benedictine" version of liberation theology will penetrate the African church -- and to what extent it might then transform the social and political life of the continent -- is unclear. If you're looking for something to chew on from the Benin journey, however, there it is.

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