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Benedict in Cameroon a tale of two trips

by John L. Allen Jr.

All Things Catholic

By the time this column appears, Pope Benedict XVI will have left Cameroon for Angola, beginning the second leg of his March 17-23 maiden voyage to Africa. I've filed close to a dozen stories from Cameroon (see links at the bottom of this page), so here I'll just offer my dominant after-the-fact impression: I don't think I've ever covered a papal trip where the gap between internal and external perceptions has been as vast as over these three days.

It's almost as if the pope has made two separate visits to Cameroon: the one reported internationally and the one Africans actually experienced.

In the U.S. and many other parts of the world, coverage has been "all condoms, all the time," triggered by comments from Benedict aboard the papal plane to the effect that condoms aren't the right way to fight AIDS. In Africa, meanwhile, the trip has been a hit, beginning with Benedict's dramatic insistence that Christians must never be silent in the face of "corruption and abuses of power," and extending through a remarkable meeting with African Muslims in which the pope said more clearly and succinctly what he wanted to say three years ago in his infamous Regensburg address, and without the gratuitous quotation from a Byzantine emperor.

Vast and pumped-up crowds flocked to see the pope, and Benedict seemed swept up in the enthusiasm. Twice he referred to Africa as the "continent of hope," and at one point, this consummate theologian even mused aloud about a new burst of intellectual energy in Africa that might generate a 21st century version of the famed school of Alexandria, which gave the early church such luminaries as Clement and Origen.

As counter-intuitive as it may seem to Westerners, it was difficult to find anyone in Cameroon -- at least anyone who wasn't a foreign journalist or missionary, or an employee of an overseas NGO -- for whom

the condoms issue loomed especially large. The locals had different opinions on whether condoms are the right way to tackle AIDS, of course, but it didn't seem to dominate their impressions of the event.

Bottom line: Seen from abroad, the trip has been about condoms; on the ground, it's felt like a celebration of African Catholicism.

Here's a surreal experience that underscores the disjunction.

On Tuesday, I prepared a piece on the pope's indirect, but unmistakable, rebuke of Cameroon's President Paul Biya -- a former Catholic seminarian who has tried repeatedly to wrap himself in the papal flag while Benedict is in town. Billboards around Yaoundè assert a "perfect communion" between the two, and colorful African-style shirts and dresses distributed for the trip are festooned with pictures of Biya and Benedict. Biya is also, however, a classic African strongman, who has ruled Cameroon since 1982 through a blend of occasional repression and constant corruption.

Benedict didn't want to embarrass his host, but he also didn't want the photo-op to imply a papal seal of approval. Thus, without mentioning Biya directly, Benedict said pointedly that Christians must speak out against "corruption and abuses of power." That was enough to set off shockwaves in Cameroon, and it seemed to invigorate local church leaders. The next morning, Cardinal Christian Tumi, Cameroon's lone cardinal, publicly asked Biya to withdraw as a candidate in elections set for 2011, something that previously almost no one would have dared to do.

I was outlining all this in my article when I had to break off to do an interview with CNN International about day one of the trip ? which was entirely devoted to the condoms controversy. To be honest, I had to wonder if we were even talking about the same event.

That said, let me be clear: This perception gap is not exclusively, or even primarily, the media's fault. The reporter from French TV who asked Benedict the condom question aboard the papal plane was well within bounds; AIDS is serious business, and it's fair game to ask the pope about it on his first visit to the continent that's been hardest hit by the disease.

Once the question was popped, the ball was in Benedict's court. Much of the blame for what happened next, therefore, has to lie at his feet.

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By that, I'm not taking any position on the substance of the pope's answer, though in fairness he did no more than repeat church teaching on contraception, as well as the nearly unanimous view of every African bishop I've ever interviewed: that condoms give their people a false sense of invulnerability, thereby encouraging risky sexual behavior. That may be debatable, but one can hardly fault the pope for taking his cues from the bishops on the ground. (Ironically, popes usually get in trouble precisely for not listening to local bishops.)

Setting aside what he said, there's still the matter of whether this was the right time and place to say it -- especially since it would inevitably overshadow the message Benedict was flying to Africa to deliver. (It's worth recalling that the pope has been down this road before. En route to Brazil in 2007, he took a question about excommunicating politicians who support abortion rights, thereby blotting day one of his first trip to Latin America out of the sky.)

Anybody who's ever spent time in front of cameras knows how to dance around a question that's not going to lead anywhere good. Benedict could have said something like: "Of course the church is deeply concerned about AIDS, which is why a quarter of all AIDS patients in the world are cared for by Catholic hospitals and other facilities. As far as condoms are concerned, our teaching is well-known, but today isn't the right time for discussing it. Instead, I want to focus on my message of hope to the African people," etc., etc.

The story that probably would have resulted -- "Benedict shrugs off condoms query" -- would hardly have generated a global uproar.

Someone hungry for a silver lining might be tempted to say that the sideshow on condoms made the world pay attention to the Africa trip -- except, of course, it didn't. Instead, Africa became a backdrop to another round in the Western culture wars.

Yet however one assigns the blame, the fact remains that international discussion of Benedict in Cameroon has left a badly distorted impression of the trip's aims and content. If the first rule for assessing an event is to understand what actually happened, then drawing conclusions about Benedict's African journey is going to require more than simply following the bouncing ball on the great condom debate.

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While in Cameroon, I had the opportunity to reconnect with an old friend: Archbishop John Onaiyekan of Abuja, Nigeria, former president of the Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar, and one of the most articulate and forceful leaders of the African church. Among other things, Onaiyekan was a principal force behind the working paper for the upcoming Synod for Africa presented by the pope on Thursday.

We spoke of many things, but here I'll pass along the most striking element of our conversation.

Repeatedly, I pressed Onaiyekan to get concrete about what the West ought to do for Africa. Should we lower trade barriers, for example, or restructure the International Monetary Fund, or perhaps stop signing deals to exploit natural resources with authoritarian governments? It was obvious Onaiyekan was reluctant to be drawn onto that ground, though I knew from previous conversations that he favors all of the above. Finally, I simply asked: "What's the problem?"

"The problem is the way you phrased the question," he said. "You asked how the West can 'help' Africa. We're not interested in 'help' in that sense, meaning that we are exclusively the receivers of your generosity. We're interested in a new kind of relationship, in which all of us, as equals, work out the right way forward."

The most important thing the West can do, Onaiyekan stressed, is not giving increased development aid or more trade, but what he called a "change of mentality" -- including, he said, a change of mentality within the church.

"Let me give you an example," he said. "I arrive in Cologne as the Archbishop of Abuja, and I want to meet the Archbishop of Cologne. The question I ask myself is, 'Am I going to meet a brother archbishop?' Theoretically, theologically, of course I am. We are both successors of the apostles, we are both in charge of a whole group of Christ's faithful. But when I arrive in Cologne, I have to pass through the whole bureaucracy of the archdiocese before I can get an appointment to see the archbishop, if you are lucky enough to get one. That already confuses the whole situation. Even if the archbishop of Cologne

wanted to relate to me as a brother, he has to make an extra effort."

Too often, Onaiyekan argued, church leaders in the West tend to look at developing countries as problems to be solved, rather than as partners in a search for solutions. He was also clear that the mentality he's describing is a two-way street; one can find it, he said, among some African prelates.

"Some of my colleagues go all over the place talking in a very subdued tone, painting a picture of a poor Africa that is totally helpless," Onaiyekan said. "They tell long stories of woe and the need to help us, and sometimes they may even exaggerate how bad things are in order to squeeze out a bit of water from the stony hearts of those to whom they are talking."

"I have never believed in that, never," he said, emphasizing and drawing out the word "never." He said his refusal to come hat in hand "has caused me a bit of problems here and there, but I believe it's also won me respect."

Onaiyekan's vision of how church leaders in the United States and in Europe should think about Africa is this: "It would be natural for the bishops of the Western world to be concerned about what's happening in the poorer countries, and to listen to the link between their affluence and our poverty. There is a link, and it is the job of the church all over the world to see how we can do something about this anomaly. But we must do this as brothers and sisters in one church, not as patrons in the West confronting objects of charity."

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Now for some local color from Cameroon.

1.tAfrican liturgy

Without any doubt, Africans know how to stage a Mass. Quite aside from its spiritual significance, the liturgy at Amadou Ahidjo Stadium in Yaoundè on Thursday was a blast. It featured some of the most infectious singing, dancing, and music I've ever witnessed, along with the sensation of being among 40,000 people who were genuinely happy just to be in one another's company.

The depth of faith felt in that stadium was remarkable.

I was reminded of a similar experience I had in Mexico City, during the canonization Mass of Juan Diego, which also featured exuberant local music and dance. One hard-bitten agnostic from network TV who was hanging out with me in the press area whispered: "If they did it this way every Sunday, even I would show up!"

To be sure, African rhythms of worship can take a little getting used to. Organizers positioned the press corps adjacent to some of those lucky enough to draw seats close by the papal altar. One minute, they were chiding us for talking too loud and telling us to put out our smokes; the next, they were gyrating and singing so loudly we couldn't hear ourselves think. Before long, however, we got the hang of it.

Here's a rave review: The first bus back to the hotel for the press corps during a papal Mass leaves right after the homily, since that's usually the "newsy" part of the event. Generally people get antsy to leave because they have stories to file, but in Yaoundè, the Mass was so entertaining that a few of us lost track of time and almost missed our ride.

2.tDiscovering Cameroon

After a few days in Cameroon, one can begin to understand why many people grudgingly tolerate Biya's regime, despite its flaws. Especially by the standards of West Africa, Cameroon is peaceful, tolerant, orderly, and relatively developed. (One example: At the papal Mass, I was surprised to discover that my laptop picked up a strong wireless signal, which is more than I can say for some papal events in Europe I've covered over the years.)

When I say "relatively" developed, however, I mean it. A case in point came Wednesday, when I bounded downstairs early in the morning, invigorated by a steaming hot shower, to meet my fixer. (In the business, short-term local hires are called "fixers"; they do translation, set up interviews, deal with the bureaucracy, and help you get around. In my experience, when a reporter does not know the language or the culture, the quality of his or her reporting is directly dependent on the quality of the fixer.)

In Cameroon, I was lucky enough to find an outstanding local aide in Serge Massock, an articulate young English teacher and a parishioner at the cathedral in Yaoundè. That morning, Serge informed me that water service had broken down throughout the city, so most people didn't even have water to drink, let alone bask in the kind of long shower I had in the Hilton. (That's the hotel where the Vatican press corps was lodged, and where the press center was located.) In a similar vein, that night a loud alarm sounded in the hotel. My wife and I initially thought it might signal a fire, but it quickly went away. I later learned it meant the hotel's generator was kicking in, because the power grid in our part of town had gone black. Looking off our balcony, it was eerie to see an entire city of 1.2 million plunged into near-total darkness, something locals told us is a regular feature of life.

For the record, I did my part to prime the local pump. When my wife, Shannon, and I arrived at the Hilton after flying 26 hours, we discovered that while I had packed my suit jackets, I had neglected to include the accompanying pants. The next morning, therefore, I went down to the clothes shop in the hotel lobby and bought a suit. (As with White House correspondents, journalists on the Vatican beat are expected to dress the part.) No doubt I paid too much, one sign of which is that the guy who runs the shop seemed to take the next couple of days off. Nonetheless, as I tried to persuade Shannon: "I'm not just buying a suit ? I'm buying a story."

Unfortunately for me, she wasn't sold.

3.tA note on language

Pope Benedict called Cameroon "Africa in miniature," a reference to its sprawling ethnic, geographic, and cultural diversity, and it's also true linguistically. Aside from more than 200 tribal languages, the country also includes Francophones and Anglophones, speakers of the two principal languages of politics, commerce, and education in Africa. Both French and English are considered official national languages in Cameroon.

In an attempt to honor that, Benedict XVI typically began his speeches in French, then switched to English before coming back to French. (As a footnote, this was the first time Benedict pronounced part of a homily in English during a papal trip since Yankee Stadium last April.)

While a noble gesture, the pope's convention actually misread the social reality. Linguistically, Cameroon is Canada in reverse. Canada, too, is composed of Francophones and Anglophones, but there the Anglophones are the majority and many never bother to learn French. Here Francophones are the majority, and many can't speak English. Yaoundè is in the Francophone zone, meaning that when Benedict switched to English, many people in his audience had no idea what he was saying.

Alas, the neglect of English also seems to infect the church. One African bishop jokingly described the way things work in Cameroon's bishops' conference: "The Francophones always say that this is Cameroon, and we are a bilingual country ? therefore, let's speak French!"

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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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