

Pope extols women's rights in Africa

John L. Allen Jr. | Mar. 22, 2009



Pope Benedict greets women and children in Luanda, Angola, March 21. (CNS/Reuters)

Pope Benedict XVI delivered a strong plea for women's rights during the next-to-last day of his first trip to Africa, insisting that discrimination against women "forms no part of God's plan."

Several African women, however, said the pope's message is undercut by what they see as a pattern of discrimination inside the church itself.

The pope's comments came during an address in Luanda, the Angolan capital, to Catholic movements involved in the promotion of women. Earlier in the day, the pontiff celebrated an open-air Mass in the Angolan capital that drew a massive crowd estimated by local authorities at one million people.

"We must recognize, affirm and defend the equal dignity of man and woman," the pope said in his session with women's groups.

Benedict XVI quoted from the late John Paul II's 1995 message for the World Day of Peace, emphasizing that women have a "full right to become actively involved in all areas of public life, and this right must be affirmed and guaranteed, also, where necessary, through appropriate legislation."

"This acknowledgment of the public role of women should not detract from their unique role within the family," Benedict's quote from John Paul continued. "Here their contribution to the welfare and progress of society, even if its importance is not sufficiently appreciated, is truly incalculable."

By virtually any measure, the pope's assertion of male-female equality remains more an aspiration than a reality across much of Africa.

According to the United Nations, women are just slightly more than 50 percent of the overall population, but they represent 61 percent of all AIDS cases. The director of the Etoudi Maternity clinic in Yaoundè, the capital city of Cameroon, told *NCR* on Saturday that at least a quarter of all the pregnant women the clinic treats are HIV-positive, while the country's overall adult infection rate is just five percent.

Days before Benedict XVI's arrival in Africa, the United Nations released a new study asserting that 51 percent of African women have been victims of violence, 11 percent suffer violence while pregnant, 21 percent marry before the age of fifteen, and 24 percent experience genital mutilation.

In the face of those realities, Benedict XVI issued a strong call to action.

"I call everyone to an effective awareness of the adverse conditions to which many women have been -- and continue to be -- subjected," he said, "paying particular attention to ways in which the behavior and attitudes of men, who at times show a lack of sensitivity and responsibility, may be to blame."

The pope argued that the future of African families, and therefore African society, in many ways rests in the hands of women.

"History records almost exclusively the accomplishments of men, when in fact much of it is due to the determined, unrelenting and charitable action of women," he said.

"Think of all the places afflicted by great poverty or devastated by war, and of all the tragic situations resulting from migrations, forced or otherwise," the pope said. "It is almost always women who manage to preserve human dignity, to defend the family and to protect cultural and religious values."

Benedict held up two role models for African women: Teresa Gomes and Maria Bonino. Gomes was a lay woman who held her parish together during the most violent period of the Angolan civil war; Bonino was an Italian pediatrician and volunteer, who died in Angola during an epidemic and is buried in the country.

Benedict also urged men to assume their responsibilities as husbands and fathers.

"Society must hold husbands and fathers accountable for their responsibilities towards their families," he said.

Church women respond

Some African women, however, argued that the Catholic church here does not always live up to the ideals sketched by the pope.

"Women are always in second place in the church," said Pauline Maissaba, a 24-year-old Cameroonian Catholic, who spoke to *NCR* following Sunday Mass at Yaoundè's St. Kisito Parish, where the liturgy is celebrated in the local Ewondo language.

"When you come to church, you always see priests, deacons, and seminarians taking charge," Maissaba said. "Women clean the church, they wash the priest's clothes, and they do the cooking. They're always doing the less rewarding work."

Two African members of a women's religious order, the Servants of the Holy Heart of Mary, seemed to agree.

"The church talks about honoring the place of women, as if women are no longer left behind. But women are left behind," said Grace Atem, a 22-year-old Cameroonian who's in formation with the Holy Heart sisters.

Sr. Anastasie Bekono, who directs a vocational school for girls sponsored by the order, said their second-class status was on display during the pope's visit.

"When it comes to decision-making in the church, you won't see many women," Bekono said. "Even the pope's visit shows this. In Cameroon, the pope met the bishops, he met the Muslims, he met politicians, but he did not

meet with women."

Bekono and Atem argued that if the pope were serious about promoting women in the church, he would have met a group of major superiors of women's orders, in addition to meeting the bishops of each country he visited.

Neither Bekono nor Atem said they favored the ordination of women to the priesthood. They suggested that their concern is not challenging doctrine, but rather the practical ways in which women are excluded from leadership -- for reasons, they hinted, which are less theological than sociological.

Not every African woman, however, seemed dissatisfied.

"We are all the same in the church," said Monique Enyegue, 51, of Cameroon. "There is no discrimination."

The evil of war

Earlier in the day, Benedict XVI touched on other pressing social issues, continuing what has been a remarkably outward-looking emphasis during his maiden voyage in Africa.

"Tragically, the clouds of evil have also overshadowed Africa, including this beloved nation of Angola," Benedict said during an open-air Mass in Luanda's Cimangola Square.

Among other things, the pope made his first reference on African soil to the continent's bloodiest recent conflict -- a war in the Great Lakes region that at one point involved the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Rwanda, Burundi, Uganda, Zimbabwe and Angola, and that has left an estimated five million dead and tens of millions homeless over the last decade.

Benedict prayed for "an end to the conflict in the neighboring Great Lakes region."

More generally, the pope reflected on all the wars that have scarred Africa in recent years. The U.N. estimates that of 13 million people killed in large scale conflicts from 1994 to 2003, nine million died in sub-Saharan Africa.

"We think of the evil of war, the murderous fruits of tribalism and ethnic rivalry, the greed which corrupts men's hearts, enslaves the poor, and robs future generations of the resources they need to create a more equitable and just society -- a society truly and authentically African in its genius and values," the pope said.

"What of that insidious spirit of selfishness which closes individuals in upon themselves, breaks up families, and, by supplanting the great ideals of generosity and self-sacrifice, inevitably leads to hedonism, the escape into false utopias through drug use, sexual irresponsibility, the weakening of the marriage bond and the break-up of families, and the pressure to destroy innocent human life through abortion?" the pope added.

During brief remarks after the noontime Angelus prayer, Benedict ended on an up-beat note about Africa's future.

"May the men and women from throughout the world who join us in our prayer, turn their eyes to Africa, to this great Continent so filled with hope, yet so thirsty for justice, for peace, for a sound and integral development that can ensure a future of progress and peace for its people," he said.

The pope's trip to Angola was marred by a stampede yesterday afternoon at a stadium where the pope held a massive session with Angolan youth. Two people were killed and several injured in the melee, which occurred before the pope arrived. A Vatican spokesperson described Benedict as "very upset" upon learning what had happened.

With a brief departure ceremony in Luanda tomorrow morning, Benedict wraps up his Africa swing. His next foreign journey is set for early May, when he is scheduled to travel to Israel, the Palestinian Territories, and Jordan.

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