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To bongos and bass guitar, pope calls Africa an 'immense spiritual lung'

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Rome

tHere?s something you don?t see every day: St. Peter?s Basilica, typically a showcase for traditional and sober forms of Catholic worship, rocking to the beat of bongo drums and bass guitars, as a Congolese chorus belted out catchy African hymns such as ?Nakoma Peto? and ?Yamba Makabu?.

tSuch was the scene in St. Peter?s this morning, during an opening Mass for the second Synod of Bishops for Africa, which is set to run Oct. 4-25 in Rome.

tPope Benedict XVI led this morning?s liturgy, joined by almost 240 bishops, most of them Africans taking part in the synod. Concelebrating the Mass were the three co-presidents of the synod, Cardinals Francis Arinze of Nigeria, Wilfrid Fox Napier of South Africa, and Theodore-Adrien Sarr of Senegal, along with Cardinal Peter Turkson of Ghana, the ?relator,? or general secretary, of the synod.

tIf the musical tone was upbeat, Pope Benedict struck a more sober note in his homily this morning. The pope praised the dynamism of the faith in Africa, where the Catholic population grew during the second half of the twentieth century by some 7,000 percent, soaring from 1.9 million Catholics to an estimated 160 million today.

tThe pope called Africa ?an immense spiritual ?lung,? for a humanity that appears to be in a crisis of faith and hope.? Later, during his midday Angelus address, Benedict praised the "extraordinary human wealth" of Africa.

tNonetheless, in his homily Benedict warned that Africa faces two serious threats, suggesting that the synod should carefully ponder responses to both.

tThe first threat, Benedict said, is a ?practical materialism, combined with relativistic and nihilistic thought.? Those philosophical currents, he suggested, are reaching Africa from the West.

t?The so-called ?first world? has exported and is still exporting its toxic spiritual refuse,? the pope said, ?which infect the populations of other continents, especially in Africa.?

t?Colonialism is finished in a political sense,? the pope said, ?but it?s not completely gone away.?

tThe second threat Benedict identified is ?religious fundamentalism, mixed with political and economic interests.?

t?Groups with diverse religious affiliations are spreading themselves throughout the African continent,? the pope said. ?They do so in the name of God, but according to a logic opposed to that which is divine. They?re not teaching and practicing love and respect for liberty, but intolerance and violence.?

tThe pope also made clear reference to the social ills that continue to scar Africa, citing ?exploitation, conflicts and corruption,? as well as ?poverty, injustices, violence and wars.? He called upon the church in Africa to be a source of ?prophecy and ferment of reconciliation among the various ethnic, linguistic and religious groups, within individual nations and across the entire continent.?

In his Angelus remarks, Benedict likewise noted that life in Africa is marred by "so much poverty, and still suffers under heavy injustices."

tThe synod?s official theme is ?The Church in Africa at the Service of Reconciliation, Justice and Peace.?

tThe pope recalled his trip last March to Cameroon and Angola, saying the experience left him with a ?grateful and moving memory.?

tBenedict XVI acknowledged the presence at this morning?s Mass of several representatives of other Christian denominations, including an Orthodox Patriarch from Ethiopia, His Holiness Abuna Paulos.

tThe Synod for Africa begins tomorrow morning with a speech from Turkson, formally known as the *Relatio ante disceptationem*, intended to set the table for the discussion to follow.

The first week or so will be largely occupied by brief speeches from most of the synod participants, before small groups begin working on propositions to be adopted by the synod and submitted to the pope.

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