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Pope: Angolans must resist Gospel-contradicting customs

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VATICAN CITY -- Angolan Catholics must resist customs in their country that go against the Gospel, including the practice of cohabitation without marriage, shunning or even killing children and old people accused of being witches, and divisions based on tribal origin, Pope Benedict XVI said.

"Christians breathe the spirit of their time and experience the pressure of the customs of their society, but through the grace of baptism, they are called to renounce the dangerous prevailing tendencies," the pope told the bishops of Angola and Sao Tome.

Meeting the bishops Oct. 29 at the end of their "ad limina" visits to the Vatican, Pope Benedict said there were three practices widely accepted in Angolan society that are contrary to the Gospel and the good of the human family.

The first, he said, is what Angolans call "amigamento," or cohabitation, which the pope said "contradicts God's plan for procreation and the human family."

Pope Benedict said the low rate of Catholic marriages in Angola indicates a serious problem, including for social stability.

The pope praised the bishops for conducting a three-year program aimed at strengthening marriages and family life and he urged them to help Angolan Catholics understand that marriage is between one man and one woman, united for life.

The second problem, he said, was that many Angolan Christians have hearts "still divided between Christianity and traditional African religions" and they turn to superstitions when faced with problems and suffering.

"An abominable effect of this is the shunning and even killing of children and old people who are condemned by false accusations of witchcraft," the pope said.

Pope Benedict encouraged the bishops to continue speaking out against the practice and to remind people that all human life is sacred.

The pope also urged the bishops to continue their efforts to help Angolans overcome tensions and prejudices based on ethnic or tribal identity, and to insist that those tensions are particularly inappropriate within the church.

"Around the altar, men and women of different tribes, languages and nations gather, and by sharing the same body and blood of Jesus in the Eucharist," they truly become brothers and sisters, he said.

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