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Transcript from Papal Plane

John L. Allen Jr. | Nov. 18, 2011 NCR Today

COTONOU, BENIN -- Popes rarely hold press conferences, which makes each papal encounter with the media remarkable for something ? either for what?s said, or what?s not. Benedict XVI?s session with the press en route to Benin this morning, on day one of his Nov. 18-20 voyage to the West African nation of eight million, offered a taste of each.

Perhaps the biggest news flash is what wasn?t said ? indeed, what wasn?t even allowed to surface. Unlike his last outing to Africa in 2009, this time Benedict did not wade into the debate over condoms and AIDS.

As usual, the Vatican spokesperson, Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi, had asked reporters to submit questions in advance, and then he put them to the pope in a 15-minute Q&A shortly after the papal plane took off from Rome?s Fiumicino airport. Subjects ranged from Evangelical and Pentecostal Christianity to peace and reconciliation commissions, but nothing on HIV/AIDS or condoms.

In terms of what was actually said this morning, the pontiff offered a balanced view of Evangelical/Pentecostal growth around the world. He suggested there are things the Catholic church can learn from these groups, but also clearly indicated other features to avoid ? such as ?sentimentality? in worship, or an overly tight embrace of the local culture that leaves the universal dimension of the church out of focus.

Benedict also praised the ?fresh humanism of the young soul? of Africa, arguing that a ?metaphysical? view of the world is still alive on the continent, as opposed to a ?rigid positivism? that excludes God. On a personal note, the pope offered a warm personal memory of the late Cardinal Bernardin Gantin of Benin, a close friend from the John Paul years. Benedict is scheduled to pray at Gantin?s tomb.

The following is a rush NCR translation of Benedict?s comments today, aside from an initial question about the reasons why he chose Benin. The pope took one question in French, the national language of Benin, and the rest in Italian.

Lombardi

Holy Father, here on board the plane there are forty journalists representing various agencies and broadcast outlets. In Cotonou, there are a thousand journalists waiting who will follow the visit on-site. As usual, I?ll ask you a few questions collected in these days from our colleagues.

While Africans suffer from a weakening of their traditional institutions, the Catholic church is confronted by the growing success of Evangelical and Pentecostal churches, which are sometimes created in Africa. They propose an attractive faith, with a great simplification of the Christian message. They emphasize healing and mix their cult with traditional religious practices. How should the Catholic church react to these communities, which are often aggressive towards the church? How can the Catholic church seem attractive, when these communities present themselves as warm and inculturated?

Benedict XVI

tThese communities are a global phenomenon, on all the continents. Naturally, they?re present above all, in different ways, in Latin America and in Africa. I would say their characteristic elements are very little ?institutionality? and few institutions, giving little weight to institutions; a message that?s simple, easy, and understandable, and apparently concrete; and, as you said, a participative liturgy expressing the sentiments of the local culture, with a somewhat syncretistic approach to the religions. All this guarantees them, on the one hand, some success, but it also implies a lack of stability. We know that some [followers of these groups] return to the Catholic church, or they move from one of these communities to the other.

Thus, we don?t need to imitate these communities, but we should ask ourselves what we can do to give new life to the Catholic faith. I would suggest, as a first point, a message that?s simple and understandable, but also profound. It?s important that Christianity doesn?t come as a difficult European system, one which someone else can?t understand or realize, but as a universal message that God exists, God matters, God knows us and loves us, and that in concrete, religion provokes collaboration and fraternity. Thus a simple, concrete message is very important.

Second, it?s important that our institutions not be too heavy. What must be prevalent is the initiative of the community and the person. Finally, I would say that a participative liturgy is important, but one that?s not sentimental. Worship must not be simply an expression of sentiments, but raise up the presence and the mystery of God into which he enter and by which we allow ourselves to be formed.

Finally, I would say with regard to inculturation that it?s important we not lose universality. I would prefer to speak of ?inter-culturation,? not so much inculturation. It?s a matter of a meeting between cultures in the common truth of our being as humans, in our time. Thus we grow in a universal fraternity. We mustn?t lose this grand thing that is Catholicity, that in all parts of the world we are brothers and sisters, we are one family, where we know each other and collaborate in a spirit of fraternity.

Lombardi

Holiness, in recent decades there have been many operations of ?peacekeeping? on African soil, conferences for national reconstruction, commissions of truth and reconciliation, with results which are sometimes good and sometimes disappointing. During the Synod for Africa, the bishops had strong words on the responsibility of political leaders on the continent. What message do you plan to address to the political leaders of Africa? What?s the specific contribution the church can give to the construction of a durable peace on the continent?

Benedict XVI

tThe message is contained in the text I?ll present to the church in Africa, and I can?t repeat it right now in just a few words. However, it?s true there have been many international conferences, many for Africa, for universal fraternity. They say nice things, and sometimes they really do good things. We have to recognize that. Yet certainly the words, the desires and good intentions, are greater than what?s been accomplished. We have to ask ourselves why the reality doesn?t match these words and good intentions.

tA fundamental factor, it seems to me, is that a renewal in the direction of universal fraternity demands renunciation. It demands going beyond egoism, to be for the other. That?s easy to say but hard to accomplish. The human person, after original sin, wants to possess himself ? to have life, not to give life. I want to keep whatever I have. Naturally with this mentality, that I don?t want to give but to have, things don?t work. It?s only with love, and the awareness of a God who loves us and gives to us, that we can arrive at a capacity to give ourselves away. We know, of course, that it?s precisely in giving away that we actually gain anything.

tThus beyond the details contained in the document from the synod, I would just say that this is a fundamental position ? that loving God and being in friendship with this God who gives himself to us, we too can dare and learn to give and not simply to have, to renounce ourselves for the other, and to give up our lives in their certainty that this is precisely how we?ll gain it.

Lombardi

tHoliness, at the opening of the African synod in Rome, you spoke of Africa as a ?great spiritual lung for a humanity experiencing a crisis of faith and hope.? Thinking about the great problems of Africa, this expression can appear almost disturbing. In what sense do you think faith and hope for the world can truly come from Africa? Are you thinking about the role of Africa in the evangelization of the rest of the world?

Benedict XVI

tNaturally, Africa has great problems and difficulties, like all humanity has great problems. If I think about my youth, it was a completely different world than that of today, so much so that I sometimes think I?m living on a different planet from when I was a young man! Humanity finds itself in an ever more rapid process of transformation, and for Africa this process over the last 50-60 years, moving from independence after colonialism up to today, has been very demanding. Naturally, it?s a very difficult process with great problems that haven?t yet been entirely resolved.

tNevertheless, there?s a freshness, a ?yes? to life, in Africa, a youthfulness that?s full of enthusiasm and hope. There?s a sense of humor, a joy. It shows a freshness, too, in the religious sense. There?s still a metaphysical perception of reality, meaning reality in its totality with God. There?s not a rigid positivism, that restricts our life and makes it a little arid, and also turns off hope. I would say there?s a fresh humanism in the young soul of Africa, despite all the problems that exist. There?s a reserve of life and vitality for the future that we can count upon.

Lombardi

tA final question, Holiness. Let?s return a moment to something you?ve identified as one of the motives for this trip to Benin. We know that the memory of Cardinal Gantin has an important place on this trip. You knew him very well. He was your predecessor as dean of the College of Cardinals. The universal esteem that surrounds him is very great. Can you give us a brief personal comment on him?

Benedict XVI

tI saw Cardinal Gantin for the first time at my ordination as Archbishop of Munich in 1976. He had come become one of his former students was a disciple of mine. That had been the beginning of a friendship between us, without our having met. On that important day of my episcopal ordination, it was beautiful for me to meet this young African bishop full of faith, full of joy and courage. Then, we worked together a great deal, above all when he was the prefect of the Congregation for Bishops and then in the College of Cardinals. I always marveled at his deep and practical intelligence, his sense of discernment, to not trip over beautiful ideological phrases but to grasp what?s essential and what doesn?t make sense. He also had a true sense of humor which was very beautiful. Above all, he was a man of deep faith and prayer. All this made Cardinal Gantin not just a friend, but an example. He was a great African Catholic bishop, and I?m truly happy now that I?m able to pray at his tomb and to feel his closeness, his great faith, which will always make him an example for me and a friend.

Lombardi

tHoliness, permit me to add that your disciple who invited Cardinal Gantin is also present here with us on the trip, Monsignor [Barthelemy] Adoukonou [Secretary of the Pontifical Council for Culture], so he?s also present for this beautiful experience. We thank you for this time you?ve given us. We wish you a good trip, and, as usual, we?ll try to ensure a good distribution of your messages for Africa in these days. Thanks again, and see you soon!
NCR senior correspondent is traveling with the pope in Benin. Below are a list of stories he has filed so far. Watch the NCR website for updates throughout the weekend.

- **Benedict?s Africa plan: Stay spiritual, and stay Catholic** [1], Saturday, November 19, 2001
- **On AIDS, Benedict avoids the ?C? word** [2], Saturday, November 19, 2001
- **In voodoo capital, Benedict blasts 'occultism and evil spirits'** [3], Saturday, November 19, 2001
- **From a Eurocentric pope, a remarkably African message** [4], Saturday, November 19, 2001
- **The political nerve of Catholicism in Africa** [5], Friday, November 18, 2001
- **Don't surrender to laws of market, pope says** [6], Friday, November 18, 2001
- **Memo to bishops: Think globally on religious freedom** [7], Friday, November 18, 2001
- **Transcript from Papal Plane** [8], Friday, November 18, 2001
- **From rumba to voodoo, subtext abounds on pope?s Africa trip** [9], Thursday, November 17, 2001

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