NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

# From a Eurocentric pope, a remarkably African message

John L. Allen Jr. | Nov. 19, 2011 NCR Today

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*Cotonou, Benin*

tIf one were to survey African Catholic leaders about their most pressing social challenges, responses would likely focus on their struggles against corruption and religious intolerance. As it happens, those were precisely the two themes raised today by Pope Benedict XVI, in a highly anticipated speech to government and religious leaders at Benin?s Presidential Palace.

tFor an octogenarian German pontiff often accused of being Eurocentric, it came off as a remarkably ?African? message.

(The charge of Eurocentrism continues to dog the pope. Just last week, veteran Italian journalist Marco Politi published a new book, *Crisis of a Papacy*, arguing that Benedict is insufficiently attentive to the ?global and geopolitical? dimension of his role.)

tHeading into this morning?s speech, Vatican aides had dropped hints that it shaped up as a centerpiece of the trip. Benedict?s broad theme was Africa as a continent of hope, which he insisted is not ?mere rhetoric? but rather ?a personal conviction which is also that of the church.? The pope noted that hope seems to be stirring in many parts of the world; he made an indirect reference to the Arab Spring and to the birth of a new state, South Sudan, in Africa.

Yet surveying the socio-political realities of the moment, Benedict conceded, it can be depressingly difficult to make the case for optimism.

t?There are too many scandals and injustices, too much corruption and greed, too many errors and lies, too much violence which leads to misery and death,? he said.

tBenedict called upon political leaders to embrace good governance and eliminate corruption, thereby giving people a reason for hope. ?Do not cut them off from their future by mutilating their present!? he said.

tThose words carry special resonance in Benin, a country rocked last year by its own Bernie Madoff scandal in the form of a ponzi scheme perpetrated by one of the country?s major investment houses. The ?ICC Services? meltdown drained five percent of Benin?s GDP, costing thousands of small investors more than $330 million.

tFor observers here, the fact that Benedict spoke this morning before some of the same political and commercial leaders in Benin who presided over the ICC Services fiasco lent his words special subtext.
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tMore broadly, many analysts believe affluent nations could meet the Millennium Goals, throw open their markets, eliminate subsidies, and pay the Tobin Tax in full, but it would make little difference to global poverty if the resulting transfers of wealth simply end up in the pockets of corrupt elites. Estimates of the total cost of

corruption worldwide are in the neighborhood of $500 billion to $1 trillion, dwarfing the total amount spent by Western nations on overseas development assistance. The World Bank Institute reported in 2004 that countries which limit corruption and improve the rule of law can increase national incomes four-fold, calling it the ?400 percent governance dividend.?

tIn that context, Benedict?s strong appeal this morning for government to serve the common good corresponds with the top social justice priority of the African church. It?s also reminiscent of his last African outing, in March 2009, when he said in Cameroon that ?Christians must never remain silent in the face of corruption and abuses of power.?

tOn the subject of inter-religious dialogue, Benedict XVI was equally impassioned.

t?Everyone of good sense understands that a serene and respectful dialogue about cultural and religious differences must be promoted,? he said. ?No religion, and no culture, may justify appeal or recourse to intolerance and violence.?

t?Aggression,? the pontiff said, ?is an outmoded relational form which appeals to superficial and ignoble instincts.?

tThough the pope did not directly reference religious violence in some parts of Africa, sometimes related to attempts in majority Muslim areas to impose Islamic law, he did insist ?conscience is a sanctuary to be respected.?

tThat message too carries special weight in Benin, a country that?s 27 percent Catholic but with substantial pockets of Muslims, which has so far avoided the Christian-Muslim violence that?s marred its larger neighbor, Nigeria. The country?s president, Thomas Boni Yayi, is a Christian Evangelical who comes from a Muslim family.

tWhen Benedict said that ?Africa can offer all of us food for thought? on inter-religious dialogue, this may be part of what he had in mind.

tAs Benedict sometimes does when he is especially invested in a subject, he offered a simile to drive home his argument. The different cultures and religions, he said, are like the fingers on a hand, each one different but all essential to make the hand work. When they work together, he said, it?s a hand that can be held out in friendship.

t?What could be more beautiful than a proffered hand?? Benedict asked. ?Our hand too can become an instrument of dialogue. It can make hope flourish, above all when our intelligence stammers and our heart stumbles.?

t?Hatred is a failure, indifference is an impasse, and dialogue is an openness!? the pope said.

tIn a typical touch, Benedict XVI suggested that dialogue can take many forms, including ?cooperation in social or cultural areas? even when strictly theological exchange doesn?t seem possible.

tIn a sign that Benedict?s message of dialogue may find receptive soil in Benin, the country?s national TV broadcaster this morning carried a report on a prayer meeting organized last night in Cotonou by a major Evangelical church to pray for the success of the pope?s trip.

Relations between Catholicism and some of the multiform Evangelical and Pentecostal churches in Africa are sometimes strained, and just yesterday Benedict warned that Catholics should not ?imitate? these groups, which sometimes blend Christianity with elements of traditional tribal religion.

Yet the Evangelical pastor quoted on Benin television insisted, ?We are all together with the pope.?

Benedict XVI delivered the speech before a crowd of several hundred diplomats, politicians, and religious leaders gathered in the main hall of the Presidential Palace. Among the dignitaries in the front row were James Knight, U.S. Ambassador to Benin, and Mathieu Kérékou, who once ruled the country as the officially Marxist ?People?s Republic of Benin? from 1974 to 1989.

In his remarks to the pope, Benin's President Thomas Yayi Boni vowed to base the policies of Benin on Christian values, a rhetorical trope that?s common in Africa but relatively rare in the European political discourse to which Benedict is accustomed.

Boni used a bit of verbiage that raised some eyebrows among locals. He referred to his current term as president as his ?second and last,? indicating that he plans to step down. Although the constitution of Benin limits the president to two terms, there has been speculation here that Boni might attempt to amend the constitution to remain in power.

His comments this morning seem to suggest that?s not the case. As a reporter for a local paper put it, ?He said it, and he said it in the presence of the Holy Father. Now he?s stuck with it.?

Just before the pope's arrival this morning, there was a reminder of the chronic challenges of development in some African societies. The power went out in the Presidential Palace, as the local electrical grid was momentarily overloaded. Quickly, however, on-site generators kicked in, and power was restored.

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
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- **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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