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Benin presents chance for papal 'do-over' in Africa

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A woman walks past a fishing village on the road between Benin's largest city, Cotonou, and the historic town of Ouidah. (Stock Connection Worldwide/Irene Abdou)

Popes rarely get a ?do-over,? an opportunity to make something right that didn?t exactly work out as planned the first time around. Yet Benedict XVI?s Nov. 18-20 trip to the West African nation of Benin, his second visit to Africa, represents just such a chance to tee the ball up again and see if this time he can avoid the rough.

When Benedict first traveled to Africa two years ago, he had an ambitious agenda. The pope said he wanted to tell the world a ?good news? story, casting a positive spotlight on a continent that usually registers in the West only when Africans are either starving or killing each other. He also said he wanted to celebrate the phenomenal growth of Catholicism in Africa, which shot up almost 7,000 percent during the 20th century.

Instead, coverage of that March 2009 trip to Cameroon and Angola was dominated by a debate over condoms that caused the broader agenda of the trip to be ignored, especially in European and American commentary.

The drama of Benedict?s do-over, therefore, shapes up as follows: Granted, probably no pope could visit Africa and duck the condoms/AIDS issue, and Benedict will face special pressure to wade into it again given his somewhat ambiguous comments on condoms in a recent interview book. Can he do so, however, in a way that doesn?t blot every other message of the trip out of the sky?

For sure, there?s plenty more to talk about.

Benin is a French-speaking nation of 9 million where roughly half of the population is Christian and 30 percent Catholic, and where the church plays a vibrant role in public affairs. Benin?s Catholic leadership, for instance, helped defuse tensions surrounding national elections last spring. Benin is the first African state where a strongman ever ceded power after a democratic election, and it boasts a relatively robust economy and substantial mineral wealth. At the same time, Benin has also been hit with recent disasters both natural and man-made, and faces a fresh round of old threats (including offshore piracy).

In a sense, Benin represents a microcosm of Africa?s broader ?best of times, worst of times? storyline.

Last time around, that broader storyline never escaped the intense focus on condoms. Asked by a reporter aboard the papal plane en route to Cameroon about AIDS in Africa, Benedict said, ?The problem cannot be overcome by the distribution of condoms: On the contrary, they increase it.?

That suggestion triggered massive -- in some ways, unprecedented -- blowback in the West. It became a media cause célèbre, and within days, the parliament of Belgium voted to formally censure the pope, while Spain?s Socialist government announced plans to airlift 1 million condoms to Africa in protest.

The pope?s defenders insisted he was merely articulating conventional wisdom among religious leaders in Africa, and that even secular anti-AIDS experts believe that the ?ABC? approach, emphasizing abstinence and fidelity alongside condoms, has proven more effective in bringing down infection rates.

In the two years since, perceptions of the pope?s attitude on condoms have become more nuanced -- and, for some, more confusing -- in light of a 2010 interview Benedict granted to German journalist Peter Seewald. In it, the pope said that although the church does not regard condoms as a ?real or moral solution? to AIDS, they can nevertheless represent ?a first step in the direction of a moralization.?

Given lingering uncertainty over what exactly that means, as well as the fact that HIV/AIDS remains a major challenge across Africa, Benedict will likely face questions about condoms again.

That, however, is hardly the only point of interest.

For one thing, Benin has substantial pockets of both Muslims and indigenous tribal religions, making it a natural venue for Benedict to expand on his approach to interfaith relations.

Benin largely has been spared the Christian/Muslim violence that?s rocked Nigeria, its larger West African neighbor. Across the country, Christians, Muslims and animists often can be found within the same family. Some experts regard Benin as a model of a non-radicalized ?African Islam,? deeply traditional yet open to peaceful coexistence.

Remarkably, the country?s president, Thomas Boni Yayi, is a Muslim convert to evangelical Christianity -- which in other mixed Islamic/Christian societies, where Muslims often regard conversion as apostasy, might well be the cause of chronic instability.

Benin is also a compelling example of the changing face of Christian ecumenism in the 21st century. Its second-largest Christian group after Catholicism is an African-initiated church, called the Celestial Church of Christ. It was founded in 1947 by a local carpenter named Samuel Joseph Bilewu Oshoffa, who claimed both private revelations and an ability to raise the dead. Blending evangelical and Pentecostal Christianity with indigenous spirituality, the Celestials have a following of more than a half million in Benin, with outposts worldwide.

In terms of economic and political life, Benin is a good laboratory for Benedict?s ethical message in his 2009 social encyclical Caritas in Veritate. Last year, the country was rocked 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 5 percent of Benin?s gross domestic product, costing thousands of small investors more than $330 million.

The country also faces the challenge of recovering from massive flooding in 2010, which killed 46 people and left 150,000 homeless.

In one sense, Benedict, a veteran critic of Marxist materialism, should feel right at home in Benin. For a stretch

from 1974 to 1989 the erstwhile ?People?s Republic of Benin? was an officially Marxist state, but Benin chucked its Marxist ideology in early 1989, even before the fall of the Berlin Wall, and has since experienced three peaceful transitions of power.

Officially, there are three motives for Benedict?s trip.

First, the pontiff will present a document containing his conclusions from the 2009 Synod for Africa, sort of a papal game plan for Catholicism on the continent. Second, Benedict will mark the 150th anniversary of the evangelization of Benin, commemorating the arrival in 1861 of two priests of the Society of African Missions in Ouidah, the main port and a center of the slave trade in what was then called the Kingdom of Dahomey. (Today, a giant cross marks the spot where the two missionaries disembarked.)

Third, Benedict will pray at the tomb of his close friend and former colleague Cardinal Bernardin Gantin of Benin, who died in 2008. As dean of the College of Cardinals, Gantin was the highest-ranking black African in the history of the Catholic church. It was Gantin?s resignation as dean in 2002 that cleared the way for then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger to take over, a move that some observers believe propelled Ratzinger to the papacy three years later.

Gantin remains a source of deep national pride. When he died in 2008, Benin declared three days of state mourning, and the international airport in Cotonou, the country?s largest city, is named for him.

While in Benin, Benedict is also scheduled to meet Boni and other political leaders, to address seminarians, priests and religious, to visit a Catholic charity center, and to speak to the country?s bishops. Because he?s presenting the concluding document from the Synod for Africa, bishops and other Catholic leaders from across the continent are expected to converge on Benin for the papal visit.

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