

Thousands welcome pope on visit to Benin



Pope Benedict XVI arrived in Benin to a joyous welcome from thousands Friday in a nation considered a voodoo heartland and warned against "unconditional submission" to the market and finance.

Residents lined the streets as Benedict passed in his popemobile, including women wearing skirts with his picture, and even fishermen saluted with their paddles from their boats in the lagoon for the pope's second visit to Africa.

The three-day visit will culminate with a mass on Sunday in a stadium in Cotonou and also take the 84-year-old pontiff to Ouidah, a city heavy with symbolism as a centre of voodoo and which served as a major slave trading port.

"Modernity must not cause fear, but it cannot be built by forgetting the past," Benedict said in a speech after his arrival from Rome, the Italian capital enveloped in economic crisis.

"It must be accompanied by prudence in avoiding the pitfalls ... for example, the unconditional submission to the laws of the market or finance ..."

Benedict also spoke of avoiding "nationalism or tribalism that can become deadly" as well as the fueling of religious tensions.

He made his way to the cathedral in Cotonou, the West African nation's economic capital, after arriving, crowds greeting him along the route.

"Through the pope, I feel like it is God himself that I've seen," said a smiling woman who identified herself as Genevieve after the popemobile passed.

Benedict received a warm welcome of applause and cheers at the cathedral, which was decorated in yellow and white fabric.

He prayed for Mary to "fulfill the noblest aspirations of African youths, fulfill the hearts that hunger for justice, peace and reconciliation, fulfill the hopes of child victims of hunger and war."

His trip is likely to bring into focus the enormous potential of many nations on a continent with the world's fastest growing number of Catholics, but also its numerous struggles.

The pope may face questions over the Church's stance on condoms, after his comments on his first African trip to Cameroon and Angola in 2009 caused a global outcry when he suggested condom distribution aggravated the AIDS problem.

He has since seemed to ease that stance, saying in a book published last year that condom use is acceptable "in certain cases," notably to reduce the risk of HIV infection.

Sub-Saharan Africa is home to nearly 70 percent of the world's HIV cases.

The Vatican has also faced a major challenge from Pentecostal and other evangelical movements in Africa, with their lively, down-to-earth services seen by many as more relevant to their lives.

Benedict told journalists aboard his plane on Friday that the Roman Catholic Church "must not imitate" Pentecostal movements that have attracted hundreds of thousands of worshippers throughout Africa.

He added that such movements "have success, but little stability."

The Church "must have a simple, concrete, understandable message," he said.

Benin is seen as a stronghold of Catholicism, though voodoo beliefs often mix with Christianity in the country of some nine million.

The Benin Catholic Church has also dealt with a string of scandals involving priests recently, ranging from corruption to exorcism.

A Benetton advertising campaign launched this week threatened to divert attention away from issues related to the visit after controversy erupted over a photo montage showing the pope kissing a leading

imam.

On Thursday, the Vatican said that it was taking legal action to prevent the publication of the photo montage that was part of the campaign.

The highlight of the pope's trip will be the formal signing on Saturday of an apostolic exhortation called "The Pledge for Africa".

The main message of the exhortation will be peace, reconciliation and justice.

The document, a summary of the conclusions of the synod of African bishops in 2009, is also expected to refer to the problems of unequal development, corruption, rural poverty and the rise of an alternative Christian movement.

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