



The Holy See

BENEDICT XVI

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Paul VI Audience Hall

Wednesday, 23 November 2011

[[Video](#)]

Apostolic Journey to Benin

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

I still retain vivid impressions of my recent [Apostolic Journey to Benin](#), on which I would like to reflect today. Thanksgiving to the Lord spontaneously wells up in my mind: in his Providence he wanted me to return to Africa, for the second time as successor of Peter, on the occasion of the 150th anniversary of the beginning of the evangelization of Benin and to sign and officially consign the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation [Africae Munus](#) to the African ecclesial communities.

In this important document, after reflecting on the analyses and proposals that resulted from the [Second Special Assembly for Africa of the Synod of Bishops](#) that was held in the Vatican in October 2009, I wanted to offer some guidelines for pastoral action on the great continent of Africa. At the same time I wished to pay homage and to pray at the tomb of an illustrious son of Benin and of Africa who was also a great man of the Church, the unforgettable Cardinal Bernardin Gantin. His venerable memory is more alive than ever in his own country, which considers him a Father of the homeland and throughout the continent.

Today I would like to express once again my most heartfelt thanks to all those who contributed to

organizing this pilgrimage. First of all I am deeply grateful to the President of the Republic who, with great courtesy, offered me his cordial greeting and that of the entire country; to the Archbishop of Cotonou and to my other venerable Brothers in the Episcopate who welcomed me with affection. I also thank the priests, men and women religious, deacons, catechists and innumerable brothers and sisters who accompanied me with such great faith and warmth during these days of grace. Together we lived a moving experience of faith and a renewed encounter with the living Jesus Christ, in the context of the 150th anniversary of the evangelization of Benin.

I laid the fruit of the [Second Special Assembly for Africa of the Synod of Bishops](#) at the feet of the Blessed Virgin, venerated in particular at the Basilica of the Immaculate Conception in Ouidah. Following Mary's example, the Church in Africa accepted the Good News of the Gospel and brought forth many people in the faith. Henceforth the Christian communities of Africa – as both the theme of the Synod and the motto of [my Apostolic Journey](#) emphasized – are called to renew themselves in faith to be increasingly at the service of reconciliation, justice and peace. They are invited to be reconciled with their inner selves, to become joyful instruments of divine mercy, each one contributing his own spiritual and material riches to the common commitment.

This spirit of reconciliation is also indispensable, of course, at the civic level and requires openness to hope, which in addition must inspire the socio-political and economic life of the continent, as I had the opportunity to say at the [meeting with the political institutions, the Diplomatic Corps and the representatives of the religions](#). On this occasion I wished to put the accent precisely on hope, since hope must motivate life to the continent's journey, pointing out the ardent desire for freedom and justice, which, especially in recent months, brings life to the hearts of numerous African peoples. Then I stressed the need to build a society in which relations between different religions and ethnic groups are characterized by dialogue and harmony. I invited everyone to be true sowers of hope in every situation and in every walk of life.

Christians by nature are people of hope who cannot neglect their own brothers and sisters. I also recalled this truth to the immense crowd gathered for the [Sunday celebration of the Eucharist in Friendship Stadium, Cotonou](#). This Sunday Mass was an extraordinary moment of prayer and festivity in which thousands of the faithful of Benin and from other African countries took part, from the most elderly to the youngest: a marvellous testimony of how faith succeeds in bringing generations together and can respond to the challenges of every season of life.

During this moving and solemn celebration, [I consigned to the Presidents of the Bishops' Conferences of Africa the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Africae Munus*– which I had signed the day before in Ouidah](#) – destined for the bishops, priests, men and women religious, catechists and lay people of the entire African continent. In entrusting to them the fruit of the [Second Special Assembly for Africa of the Synod of Bishops](#), I asked them to meditate upon it attentively and to live it to the full in order to respond effectively to the demanding evangelizing mission of the Church, a pilgrim in Africa in the third millennium. In this important text every member of the

faithful will find fundamental guidelines that will direct and encourage on her journey the Church in Africa which is called to be, increasingly, the "salt of the earth" and the "light of the world" (Mt 5:13-14).

I addressed an appeal to everyone to be tireless builders of communion, peace and solidarity, in order to cooperate in bringing about God's plan of salvation for humanity. The Africans have responded enthusiastically to the Pope's invitation and, on their faces, in their ardent faith, in their convinced adherence to the Gospel of life, I once again recognized comforting signs of hope for the great continent of Africa.

I also felt these signs tangibly at the meeting with children and with the world of suffering. In the parish Church of St Rita I truly sampled the joy of life, the cheerfulness and enthusiasm of the new generations who constitute Africa's future. I pointed out to the festive throngs of children – one of the continent's many resources and riches, St Kizito – a Ugandan boy killed because he wanted to live in accordance with the Gospel, and I urged each one to witness to Jesus among his peers.

The Visit to the Foyer "Paix et Joie", run by Mother Teresa's Missionaries of Charity, enabled me to experience a deeply moving moment in meeting abandoned and sick children and permitted me to see in practice that love and solidarity can make the strength and affection of the risen Christ present in weakness.

The joy and apostolic fervour I found among the priests, religious, seminarians and lay people, gathered in large numbers, is a sign of sure hope for the future of the Church in Benin. I urged all to have an authentic, lively faith and a Christian life characterized by the practice of the virtues and I encouraged each one to live his or her respective mission in the Church with fidelity to the teachings of the Magisterium, in communion with each other and with the pastors, pointing out the way of holiness especially to priests, in the knowledge that the ministry is not merely a social function but brings God to man and man to God.

The meeting with the Episcopate of Benin was a moment of intense communion in order to reflect in particular on the origin of the Gospel proclamation in their country undertaken by missionaries who generously gave their lives – sometimes heroically – so that God's love may be proclaimed to all.

I invited the bishops to put into practice pastoral initiatives to inspire in families, in parishes, in the communities and in ecclesial movements a constant rediscovery of Sacred Scripture as a source of spiritual renewal and an opportunity for deepening their faith.

From this renewed approach to the word of God and from the rediscovery of their own baptism, the lay faithful will find the strength to witness to their faith in Christ and in his Gospel in their daily life. In this crucial phase for the whole continent the Church in Africa, with her commitment to

...serving the Gospel and with the courageous witness of effective solidarity can play the lead in a new season of hope.

In Africa I saw spontaneity in the yes to life, a freshness of the religious sense and of hope, a perception of reality in its totality with God and not reduced to positivism which, in the end, extinguishes hope. All this shows that in this continent there is a reserve of life and vitality for the future, on which we can count, on which the Church can count.

My journey has also been an important appeal to Africa to direct its every effort to announcing the Gospel to those who do not yet know it. It is a renewed commitment to evangelization to which every baptized person is called, promoting reconciliation, justice and peace.

To Mary, Mother of the Church and Our Lady of Africa, I entrust those whom I have had the opportunity to meet on my unforgettable [Apostolic Journey](#). I commend the Church in Africa to her. May the motherly intercession of Mary "whose heart is always inclined to God's will, sustain every effort at conversion; may she consolidate every initiative of reconciliation and strengthen every endeavour for peace in a world which hungers and thirsts for justice" ([Africae Munus](#), n. 175). Many thanks.

To special groups:

I offer a cordial greeting to the Sisters of Jesus and Mary taking part in a course of spiritual renewal. I also greet the international group of Marist and Marianist Brothers. My warm welcome likewise goes to the pilgrims from Indonesia. Upon all the English-speaking visitors present at today's Audience, including the groups from Nigeria, South Korea and the United States of America, I invoke God's blessings of joy and peace.

I am particularly glad to welcome the Delegation of the Catholic-Orthodox Forum, composed of numerous prelates to whom I address my most cordial greeting. To the Catholic members in particular, I offer heartfelt good wishes on the occasion of the 40th anniversary of the Council of European Episcopal Conferences.

A thought now, as usual for the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newlyweds*.

We are experiencing the last days of the liturgical year which invite us to consider with a gaze of faith the time that is passing. Dear *young people*, harmonize your personal journey with the journey of the Church, marked by the liturgy, and prepare yourselves to live the season of Advent as a time of inner waiting for the Messiah, Our Saviour; dear *sick* people, invoke from God the gift of hope, offering your sufferings for this as well; and may you, dear *newlyweds*, always have trust in divine Providence which guides and accompanies Christian families.

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