

Vatican by Maria Cristina Fiocchi

How many children die from debt?

On his fifth pilgrimage to Africa, Pope John Paul II posed the question directly.

John Paul II's recently concluded, fifth pilgrimage to Africa has been little noticed, if not downright covered up, by the majority of the mass media. The reasons are well known: Convergence of empire-building interests of the two superpowers, their pragmatism, and the abandonment of all policies that favor the development of the poorest nations, leave no room at all for dramatic realities like those present in the African continent.

The Pope visited Madagascar, Reunion, Zambia, and Malawi, countries stricken by poverty, unemployment, and the dramatic problem of refugees, crushed by an enormous burden of unpayable debts, and internally weakened by terrible epidemics like AIDS. He touched on all these topics in his homilies and speeches.

"Africa," he said, "is at a crossroads not only for itself but for world history."

In Madagascar, a country reduced to misery by the incompetent policies of a socialist regime and its foreign debt, the Pope denounced population-reduction policies: "Reject the imperialism of contraception, and even more, abortion, which is also contrary to Malagasy wisdom and to civil law," he exhorted. Listen to your bishops' teachings against "attempts to impose, from the outside, methods to limit population growth, other than natural family planning."

The Pope responded to youth who had described the problems and anxieties about the future of their country by encouraging them to have faith: "I understand that the future worries

you," and added, "I do not see you as a canoe adrift . . . it's not my task to analyze nor to propose solutions, because it is you, the Malagasy, who must act." Working for development, he reiterated, "is a moral duty. A duty of all citizens and leaders. In the face of unequal distribution of resources, there is a duty of solidarity within a people. And even beyond their own borders."

Speaking to the diplomatic corps in Tananarive, the Pope harkened back to Paul VI's Encyclical *Populorum Progressio*, and challenged those in power to effectively carry out the words of peace which they so dutifully pronounce. "In the Encyclical," the Pope noted, "which I consecrated to the social question to provide a followup to my predecessor Paul VI's appeals of some 20 years ago, I already invited the nations of the North and South to better coordinate their means. In this regard, technology transfers appear as a growing necessity. The sharing of knowledge for everyone's benefit, is this not perhaps a requirement of justice?"

"If truly the Earth's inhabitants shall attain peace, will they then be able to tolerate that two-thirds of humanity continues to suffer hunger, that they cannot get enough education to allow them to effectively take their own development in hand, that they continue to be deprived of the means of information and communication that are currently available elsewhere and considered indispensable?"

In his next stop, in Zambia, the Pope underlined the need to resolve

the problem of external indebtedness: "The problem of the international debt is a clear example of the interdependence that characterizes relations between nations and continents. It is a problem that cannot be resolved without mutual comprehension and a mutual agreement between debtor and creditor nations, with sensitivity toward the real situations of the indebted countries on the part of the credit agencies, and without a wise and committed policy of development on the part of the industrialized nations themselves.

"Is it only a rhetorical question to ask how many children and newborn infants die every day in Africa because the resources are used to pay the debt?" he concluded. "Now is the time for a new and courageous international solidarity which is not based on one's own selfish interests, but is inspired and guided by an authentic concern for human beings."

During his stopover in Malawi, one of the tiniest African states, with a very young population, John Paul II confronted the drama of the spread of AIDS. Nine out of ten babies born in that state are seropositive for the HIV virus. The number of the victims of the disease being treated in hospitals is around 14-16% of the population, which has a 50% rate at present of seropositivity. "Today a greater and greater number of persons is affected by AIDS. We have to treat them as we would treat Christ himself," said John Paul II.

At the close of his African journey the Pope renewed his pressing appeal for the creation of a juster world: "On many occasions I have called for a new economic order which would allow the peoples of developing sector countries to guide their own destinies and to guarantee job resources for the active population." The time to respond to this call, is now.