

Pope in Africa seeks dialogue, development

by Maria Cristina Fiocchi

Peace, religious tolerance, and economic development: These were the recommendations made by the Pope during his seventh pilgrimage to the African continent, in September. Aboard the airplane which carried him from Rome to Dar es Salaam, capital of Tanzania, John Paul II told the press: "I will not launch anathema or excommunication against those who make war, but I do declare that war is an evil. War has always produced more evil than good.

"Many things in history," he continued, "have been resolved by war, but war always brings more violations of human rights and more evils than benefits and solutions." Referring to the Persian Gulf, he added, "We must do everything possible to avoid a war outcome in the Gulf."

The Pope extended this invitation to dialogue to the Muslims, who are in the majority in Tanzania. When he met the leaders of this faith in St. Peter's Church in Dar es Salaam, the Pontiff stated, "The dialogue between Christians and Muslims takes on ever-growing importance in today's world." The Christians and Muslims of Tanzania, said the Pope, "may surely build together a society which conforms to the values taught by God: tolerance, justice, peace, and concern for the poorest and weakest. I hope that the two religions can work side by side to guarantee that these values and the right to religious freedom are backed up by a civil law, a safeguard of true equality among all the citizens of Tanzania."

John Paul II has always favored encounter between the Catholic Church and Islam and has never neglected, during all of his trips abroad, to meet with local spokesmen of the Muslim faith. Today the Gulf crisis, and the danger that war might break out, and hence the specter of a religious outbreak of Islamic fundamentalism, form the framework of the papal journey into black Africa.

John Paul II is imploring peace and launching a last-minute appeal to the rich nations that they aid the peoples of less favored nations to become the true protagonists of their own development. Speaking to youth, the Pope recalled the miseries of Africa: poverty, unemployment, racism, the seduction of false messiahs. He called upon the ruling class to use the aid, scant though it be, that arrives from abroad fairly and unselfishly.

In Rwanda, he met with peasants in Kabgayi on a plateau a mile high. There the Pope took on the problem of Africa's agriculture: "The soil you cultivate," John Paul II said, "is

being used up as the years pass because of erosion and the lack of fertilizers. Sometimes there is too much rain and at other times, the rain is cruelly absent. Diseases can attack your crops and your livestock. The compensation you get for the products of your fields is not always proportional to your work and to your needs. The international environment is unfavorable to you. Famine has struck your country." The Pope appealed to the international community to give humanitarian aid in times of crisis and to pay a "fair price" for poor countries' products.

John Paul II takes much to heart the fate of Africa, which seems more and more crushed by today's brutal neo-colonialism. Since 1980, per capita income has fallen dramatically, at the rate of some 2.6% per year. Infant mortality is the highest in the world, while the average lifespan is the lowest. The list of evils does not stop there. Of a population of 600 million inhabitants, 35 million are political or economic refugees.

The horror of AIDS is spreading like wildfire. According to World Health Organization figures, in 1988 some 3 million persons were infected with the AIDS virus. In the capitals of the three countries visited by the Pope, Dar es Salaam, Bujumbura, and Kigali, 30% of the sexually active population is infected. In some areas around Lake Victoria the figure reaches 40%. In Rwanda, 38% of deaths are ascribed to AIDS. The drama is accentuated by the inadequacy of medical and sanitation facilities. The Pope spoke of a true pandemic, which can be stemmed only by a response that takes into account the medical, human, cultural, ethical, and religious dimensions of life. "The AIDS epidemic," he said, "requires an unprecedented effort of international cooperation by governments, the world medical and scientific community, and by all those who may exert influence on developing a sense of moral responsibility within society."

The last leg of the Pope's tour was to Yamoussoukro in Ivory Coast, where he dedicated the "St. Peter's of the Savannah," the grandiose basilica built by the aged President Félix Houphouët-Boigny. Many criticisms have been leveled from all sides against the imposing project commissioned by the 85-year-old President. Some have called it a thoughtless act of megalomania, a "slap in the face of the poverty" of Africa, as if the Africans don't have the right to build and enjoy the beauty of a great work of art.

Nigerian Cardinal Francis Arinze answered the criticisms by saying, "Africa is happy to have such a place to worship God. We Africans have our poor, our sick, our homeless, and our refugees. But these same Africans who suffer, recognize the value of giving to God the best of what they have. They are conscious of the fact that nothing is too costly or too beautiful to offer to God." And he concluded: "An African may not have a beautiful house, but he rejoices to see that God possesses a splendid dwelling like this marvelous church, which is a sign that the Gospel of Jesus Christ has put down definitive roots in African soil."