

Pope brings comfort to struggling Africans

By John Thavis
Catholic News Service

YAMOOUSSOUKRO, Ivory Coast — Traveling through East Africa in early September, Pope John Paul II brought sympathy and encouragement to people struggling against disease, economic distress and hunger.

The pope offered a Christian perspective on some of the region's most serious problems: ethnic strife in Burundi, famine in Rwanda and deepening poverty in Tanzania.

In all three countries, he raised a cry of alarm for what he called the "pandemic" of AIDS in Africa. To group after group, he called for a dual response: sympathy for AIDS victims and self-control over sexual behavior that can spread the disease.

Before returning to Rome, the pope traveled to Ivory Coast in West Africa to consecrate a controversial cathedral, which he called a "visible sign" of God's presence on earth.

The pontiff was welcomed at most stops by dancers, drummers and enthusiastic singers. Tens of thousands made long journeys on flatbed trucks to attend papal Masses and prayer services.

The pope closed a five-day visit to Tanzania in Moshi Sept. 5, when he celebrated Mass at the foot of snow-topped Mount Kilimanjaro, Africa's tallest peak.

There, the pope said he was impressed with the flourishing local church and the fact that it was now sending missionaries to other parts of the continent.

Before leaving Tanzania, which has seen

Western investments dry up over the past decade, the pope called for a "new era of solidarity" among nations to meet the urgent needs of Africa's poor.

He later raised the same issue in Burundi and Rwanda, urging development agencies to include Africans more fully in their projects and put more emphasis on cultural exchange.

Africans have talents and gifts, he said, which cannot always be measured in financial terms.

In Burundi, where fighting between local Tutsis and Hutus left an estimated 150,000 dead in 1972 and 1988, the pope pleaded with the nation's tribes to put their longstanding rivalry behind them.

"These hills must never again witness violence and division," he said at the start of a Sept. 5-7 visit.

The pope came to bless a national reconciliation campaign sponsored by the government and backed by Burundi's bishops. In an arrival speech delivered to President Pierre Buyoya and other dignitaries, the pope said the country should "quicken the pace" on the road to ethnic harmony.

Buyoya, who heads a Tutsi-controlled government, has recently granted concessions to the majority Hutus. He has also ended religious persecution that virtually shut down church life in the 1980s. Most of Burundi's 5.3 million population is Catholic.

The pope urged Catholic academics and the church's pastoral force to work for unity in Burundi — but without trying to erase



AP/Wide World Photos
Pope John Paul II walks by the many rows of children who welcomed him on a field outside of Gitega, Burundi, Sept. 6. The pope celebrated a Mass in Gitega, which was attended by nearly 50,000 Burundis.

ethnic differences.

The pope took time out to pay an emotional visit to Burundi AIDS patients in Bujumbura's Prince Regent Charles Hospital Sept. 7. He walked to the bedsides of about 50 people, most of them AIDS victims in the advanced stage of the disease.

The pope spoke at length to Burundi bishops about his concern over AIDS in Africa, where the disease is believed to affect half a million people. The countries the pope visited are in Africa's "AIDS belt," where an estimated 20 percent of the urban population is infected with the disease or the AIDS-causing HIV virus.

He also stressed that AIDS prevention must include ethical arguments aimed at an "ordered sexuality." In Africa, the disease is spread largely through sexual contact and affects heterosexuals and homosexuals in equal numbers.

In Rwanda, where AIDS is also prevalent, the pope told some 15,000 young people Sept. 8 to avoid sexual conduct that "ruins the very nature of sexuality and multiplies the risks" of contracting and spreading AIDS.

On Sept. 9, he made the same points during an outdoor Mass in a crowded suburb of the capital, Kigali, and in a talk to Rwandan bishops. More than in any previous papal trip, the topic took center stage.

In Burundi and Rwanda — both crowded, tiny countries — the pope said he was aware that food production is a constant battle aggravated by dense population. But he also underlined the church's position that reducing family size should not be done with contraceptives.

In Burundi, the pope traveled deep into the countryside Sept. 6 to Gitega, where he challenged Catholic couples to take responsibility for overpopulation, through natural methods promoted by the church.

"Fertility control must remain profoundly human, as the church teaches," he said.

The pope reached Gitega by car in a twisting, 75-mile-long drive past green

hills where coffee, tea and bananas are raised.

The pope said the international community had a responsibility to "pay a just price for agricultural products that it transforms into greater profits." Rwanda has struggled recently with a combination of overpopulation, exhausted land and falling commodity prices.

The pope said international aid agreements to the country, however, should not pressure Rwandans on family matters — an apparent reference to birth control programs promoted by development agencies and the government.

Rwanda is the most crowded place in Africa and has one of the fastest-growing populations. Local bishops have set up natural family planning centers in every parish, while the president, a Catholic and the father of eight children, has promoted birth control.

The pope ordained priests in all three East African countries and used his visit to boost the self-esteem of local churches. He said their flourishing religious orders, their extensive educational and health care systems, and their dedication to prayer were all signs of ecclesial vitality.

A Rwandan Catholic layman, however, publicly asked the pope whether the church hierarchy and the West were willing to give up a seeming cultural "monopoly" on models of sainthood.

The pope, in unprepared remarks, countered that there was no monopoly on sainthood and said he hoped there would someday be beatifications and canonizations of Rwandan lay people.

In Yamoussoukro, the pope reserved his strongest praise not for the new cathedral, but for the social centers that will be built next to the church. He thanked President Felix Houphouet-Boigny for his "generosity" in financing Our Lady of Peace International Foundation, which eventually will help run a nearby hospital, a youth formation center and possibly a Catholic radio station.

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