

Pontiff preaches reconciliation in Africa trip

By Cindy Wooden
Catholic News Service

BANJUL, Gambia — Pope John Paul II, visiting West Africa, preached peace and reconciliation and prayed for forgiveness for humanity's sins against the continent.

The first half of the pope's Feb. 19-26 trip included calls for Catholic-Muslim dialogue in Senegal, Gambia and Guinea; pleas for peace within those countries and on the continent; and an emotional visit to a former slave depot.

Leaving Gambia Feb. 23 for Guinea, the pope prayed for the people of nearby Liberia, which he had planned to visit in 1991, until "a fratricidal war" made that impossible.

"In addition to the deaths, injuries and sufferings which armed violence always brings with it, we cannot fail to see that such a situation destroys any chance of economic development and political stability for the peoples involved," he said.

Visiting the Slave House on the Senegalese island of Goree Feb. 22, the pope honored the memory of the estimated 11 million Africans sold into slavery in North and South America.

At the village church, he asked God's forgiveness for the "horrible aberration of those who reduced to slavery the brothers and sisters that the Gospel had destined for freedom."

"From this African sanctuary of black pain, we beg for pardon from heaven," the pope said.

Later that day, the pope put on a bou-bou, a traditional Muslim tunic, during a meeting with Muslim leaders in Dakar, Senegal. In addition to the white and gold garment, the Muslim leaders gave him a live ram, the centerpiece of a welcoming feast.



Senegalese people try to touch Pope John Paul II Feb. 20 in Dakar, Senegal, in West Africa, as he arrives at the Palace of Senegalese President Abdou Diouf on the second day of his African trip.

AP/Wide World Photos

"As religious communities that seek to submit themselves with all their soul to the will of God, Christians and Muslims must live in peace, in brotherhood and collaboration," the pope told the leaders.

The respect and esteem that the Catholic Church has for Muslims must be reciprocal, the pope told them.

The Muslim majorities do not inhibit the religious freedom of Catholics in the three nations on this papal itinerary, but "Christians are the victims of discrimination in many countries," he said.

A Muslim presence was evident at almost all the papal events, from airport greetings and farewells to Masses and a meeting with more than 15,000

youths in Dakar Feb. 21.

The youth rally summed up the region's cultures, problems and hopes in song, dance, poetry and speeches.

A dozen dancers wearing ragged clothes shuffled in formation as a poem was recited: "Why all of this misery in the green of our youth? ... Our towns are full of populations in distress, of those fleeing burning lands, lands devastated by drought, by the plague of locusts."

War, the depressed prices of agricultural products, famine and illiteracy

also were decried.

"Hear the witness of hope, the messenger of peace," the poem ended. "He is here with us."

The rally also included a procession of young students of the Koran, Islam's holy book, with their imam, who recited verses from the Muslim holy book.

At a meeting with six Muslim leaders in Ziguinchor, Senegal, the pope said religious leaders must help their faithful learn to live in peace with each other.

"I assure you that the Catholic Church in your country will continue to work for this growth in harmony," he said.

Meeting Feb. 21 with members of the regional bishops' conference in Ponguine, Senegal, the pope said religious diversity is found not only within the nations, but within specific ethnic groups and individual families.

"Only an authentic spirit of dialogue by all involved can stop such a diversity from becoming a cause of conflict and disagreement," he said.

At his last event in Senegal, a Feb. 22 Mass in Dakar, he told Catholics to be "the first to respect all groups and all minorities, to give concrete recognition to the freedom of conscience, of worship and of religious life for all, defending the same liberty for yourselves."

Greeting Gambian President Dawda Kairaba Jawara Feb. 23, the pope praised the country as a land where "the ideals of tolerance, justice and

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