

Pope asks Nigerians to respect human dignity

By Cindy Wooden
Catholic News Service

ABUJA, Nigeria — Visiting Nigeria to beatify a local priest, Pope John Paul II called on the country's military government and citizens to honor the priest's memory by respecting the human dignity of all and promoting reconciliation.

Arriving in the country March 21, the pope recognized the role Nigerian soldiers have played in restoring democracy in other West African nations and said it was time democracy be given a chance in Nigeria.

The Vatican gave Nigerian government leaders a list of about 60 prisoners, including journalists and politicians jailed for their opposition to the government, and asked for "clemency" on their behalf.

Temperatures were in the upper 90s throughout the pope's March 21-23 stay, but the 77-year-old pontiff seemed to handle the heat and humidity well, and he read his speeches in English with a strong clear voice.

He did use the ebony and ivory cane he received March 21 as a gift from Gen. Sani Abacha, the country's leader who came to power in a 1993 coup.

The pope was met at the airport by the general, who repeatedly has said he will hand power over to a civilian government in October 1998, based on the results of August general elections.

At the arrival ceremony, the pope told Abacha and all Nigerians, "You are all called to muster your wisdom and expertise in the difficult and urgent task of building a society that respects all its members in their dignity, their rights and their freedoms."

Pope John Paul thanked Nigerian soldiers for their prominent role in the West African intervention forces that have helped restore democracy in Liberia and in Sierra Leone. He particularly thanked Nigerian soldiers involved in rescuing Catholic missionaries trapped by the fighting in Sierra Leone in February.

"Justice and peace are the path of development and progress," the pope said. "May God strengthen those who walk this path in the service of the human community."

Abacha told the pope he hoped the im-



Reuters/CNS

A villager from Onitsha gives Pope John Paul II a gift during the Mass of beatification for Father Cyprian Michael Iwene Tansi in Nigeria March 22. Father Tansi was from the town and served as a priest there for 12 years.

plementation of his plans for democracy "will usher in a new era of stability and sustainable development in our country."

The pope and the general met privately that evening for about 30 minutes in the new State House in Abuja, the country's capital since 1992. The two spoke about the human rights situation in the country and the work of the Catholic Church in Nigeria, said Joaquin Navarro-Valls, papal spokesman.

Leaving Nigeria March 23, Pope John Paul once again encouraged the people and government to make democracy a reality.

"The time is ripe for your nation to gather its material riches and spiritual energies so that everything that causes division may be left behind and replaced by unity, solidarity and peace," he said.

Celebrating Mass March 22 in Nigeria's Catholic stronghold, Onitsha, in the country's Southeast, Pope John Paul be-

atified Father Cyprian Michael Iwene Tansi, a priest from the area. Father Tansi, the first Nigerian to be beatified, died in 1964 in a Trappist monastery in England, where he had gone to learn the contemplative life in order to found a monastery in Nigeria.

During the homily at the Mass, attended by an estimated 1 million people at an abandoned airfield, the pope said he came to preach what Father Tansi had preached: "reconciliation with God and reconciliation of people among themselves."

Prayers at the Mass, concelebrated by all the nation's bishops, were said in English and the five languages spoken by the largest of the country's 250 ethnic groups.

"All Nigerians must work to rid society of everything that offends the dignity of the human person or violates human rights," Pope John Paul said at the Mass.

"This means reconciling differences, overcoming ethnic rivalries and injecting

honesty, efficiency and competence into the art of governing," the pope said to applause.

The pope's theme of reconciliation and cooperation for the good of the country continued the evening of March 22 as he met with 34 Muslim leaders in Abuja. Followers of Islam make up just over half of Nigeria's population.

"As Christians and Muslims, we share belief in the one, merciful God, mankind's judge on the last day," the pope told the leaders.

True faith in God, he said, means respecting human rights, especially the right each person has to follow his or her own religion.

The world's victims of religious persecution, he said, "are sad proof that force — and not democratic principles — has prevailed; that the intention is not to serve the truth and the common good but to defend particular interests at any cost."

Religious leaders, the pope said, have an obligation to ensure their people do not misuse their faith as an excuse to harm or even kill others. Leaders must make clear their belief that "the Almighty cannot tolerate the destruction of his own image in his children."

The pope also called on Nigeria's bishops to increase their efforts to cooperate with Muslim leaders in building a new Nigeria and promoting respect between the followers of Catholicism and of Islam.

"The Creator of the one great human family to which we all belong desires that we bear witness to the divine image in every human being by respecting each person with his or her values and religious traditions, and by working together for human progress and development at all levels," he said in a March 23 message to the bishops.

"It is of the utmost importance that all Nigerians should work together to ensure that necessary changes may be brought about peacefully and without undue hardship to the weaker segments of the population," he said.

Celebrating Mass March 23 in Abuja, Pope John Paul focused on his remarks on building strong individual families as well as working toward ensuring the entire nation saw itself as a family of individuals, ethnic groups and religions all working together for the good of all.

The Catholic Church, he said, insists that such a family can be formed only when its members recognize that everyone shares certain rights and responsibilities.

"Respect for every person, for his dignity and rights, must ever be the inspiration and guiding principle behind your efforts to increase democracy and strengthen the social fabric of your country," he said during his homily.

Freedom, justice, equality and solidarity "must be the building blocks of a new and better Nigeria," he said.

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