

Pope appeals for African families, condemns promotion of abortion

LUANDA, Angola – Addressing Angolan political leaders and an international group of diplomats, Pope Benedict XVI appealed on behalf of African families struggling from the effects of poverty, disease and war.

The pope said women and girls in particular experience “crushing” discrimination and sexual exploitation. At the same time, he criticized agencies that, under the pretext of improving health care, try to promote abortion.

“How bitter the irony of those who promote abortion as a form of ‘maternal’ health care! How disconcerting the claim that the termination of life is a matter of reproductive health!” he said.

The pope made the remarks March 20 at the presidential palace in Luanda, the Angolan capital, where President Jose Eduardo Dos Santos welcomed him at an official ceremony. After private talks with the president, the pope entered a room filled with foreign diplomats stationed in Angola, bishops and other dignitaries.

The pope delivered his speech standing on a small stage decorated with Angolan and Vatican flags. After praising Angolan efforts to rebuild after a civil war, he turned to wider African questions and said the strains on African families include poverty, unemployment, disease and displacement.

“Particularly disturbing is the crushing yoke of discrimination that women and girls so often endure, not to mention the unspeakable practice of sexual violence and exploitation which causes such humiliation and trauma,” he said.

Church agencies have become increasingly active in promoting women’s rights in Africa, and the pope was scheduled to speak with Catholic activists in that field before leaving Angola. In addition to continuing discrimination in legal areas like property and marital rights, many African women suffer from human trafficking often linked to prostitution rings.

Reports in recent years by the United Nations and the World Health Organization have found that in many African countries wife-beating is common and the idea that husbands have a “right” to physically punish or intimidate their wives is deeply ingrained.

In raising the abortion issue, the pope was returning to a subject the Vatican has pressed many times in international forums. The Vatican’s concern is that international agencies are pushing abortion as a human right.

In effect, the pope said, these are policies promoted by “those who, claiming to improve the ‘social edifice,’ threaten its very foundations.”

The pope pledged that, through its charitable agencies, the church will “continue to do all it can to help families, including those suffering the harrowing effects of HIV/AIDS – and to uphold the human dignity of women and men.”

The pope addressed broader issues in Africa as well. He said that for Africa to become the “continent of hope,” good people will have to work to transform it and free their people from greed, violence and unrest.

This passage should lead to the principles of every modern democracy: respect for human rights, transparent government, an independent judiciary, a free press, a civil service of integrity, and properly functioning schools and hospitals.

The most pressing element to the transformation was a determination to “excise corruption once and for all,” he said. People of Africa are calling out not for more programs, but for “a deep-seated, lasting conversion of hearts to sincere solidarity.”

“Their plea to those serving in politics, public service, international agencies and multinational companies is simply this: Stand alongside us in a profoundly human way; accompany us, and our families and our communities,” he said.

The pope reminded richer nations not to forget their aid commitments to Africa, including the Millennium Development Goals adopted in 2000, which foresaw the commitment of 0.7 percent of the gross national product for development assistance. That goal should not become one of the casualties of the current global financial crisis, he said.

He strongly endorsed Angola's efforts to recover from a devastating 27-year civil war. In addition to government initiatives and multilateral assistance, Angola has been helped immensely by its many teachers, medical workers and civil servants who work for little or nothing in the service of the needy.

The pope's talk, broadcast on Angolan television, drew a brief standing ovation from those in attendance.

Luanda, the Angolan capital, gave the pope a rousing welcome on his first day in the country. Tens of thousands of well-wishers lined the papal motorcade route, wearing T-shirts and hats with the pope's picture and chanting, "Papa, amigo, Angola esta contigo!" - "Pope, my friend, Angola is with you!"