

*The first step of a difficult journey. How will it end?*

## John Paul II: Touching the Heart of Black Africa

BY JAMES F. CONWAY

Pope John Paul II explored the African continent this May with all the stamina, exuberance, and gusto of the nineteenth-century missionary-explorers Stanley and Livingston. He had to call on his talents as linguist, diplomat, humanist, and intellectual to deal with the complex problems he faced—and continues to face. For examples: How should Rome react to the continuing Africanization of the evangelization of the Church? What is the position of Christianity vis-à-vis the proliferation of Marxist/socialist experiments in Africa? Can Christianity coexist peacefully with Islam in a continent where the latter is growing at a rate of 3½ million adherents per year?

South of the Sahara, north of the Cape of Good Hope, "Black Africa," as it is called, is the home of 190 million Christians, whose number is estimated to increase at the rate of 6 million per year. Most of its government leaders are Christian and were educated in Christian schools, and most of its sick are attended in Christian hospitals. It offers a kaleidoscope of tribes, languages, customs, and cultures. Its forty-some young nations average only twenty-some years of independence and are still struggling to go beyond the initial phase of military rule by élites who have tied their economies to colonial and neo-colonial power blocs.

In the countries on the pope's itinerary Catholics are only a small minority of the population, with the exception of Zaire (43 per cent) and Congo, Brazzaville (33 per cent). Kenya is only 17.65 per cent Catholic, Ghana 11 per cent, Ivory Coast 9 per cent, and Upper Volta 7.05 per cent. Protestants constitute 25 per cent of Zaireans and 15 per cent of the people of Congo, Brazzaville. They number more than Catholics in the populations of Kenya and Ghana, British Anglican colonies both, and are a small minority in Ivory Coast and Upper Volta.

In Portugal's great century of navigation under Henry the Navigator, its colonies along both coasts of Africa were peppered with Capuchins and Jesuits, who preached and baptized while the Portuguese carried on trade. A Portuguese-Kikongo catechism prepared by Pere Mateus Cardoso corresponds with the dates of the Council of Trent, 1545-63. This period is called in African

Christian historical circles the proto, or first, evangelization because few concrete results or records remain. The interior of black Africa remained closed until the great explorers of the nineteenth century opened the trails for the missionaries.

Most missionaries opposed slavery, but they spoke too little too late and were generally powerless. The practice came to an end, but it was replaced by an even better system of draining Africa's riches—colonialism and mercantilism. The European powers raced to carve up the continent to the size of their pocketbooks.

### **PALM WINE AND MANIOC**

Fifty-three Zairean bishops in their smart white soutanes sashed in purple lined the air-strip like a flock of pigeons. The Zairean Catholic bishops are the most numerous local hierarchy in Africa, and Pope John Paul II would add four, newly consecrated, to their ranks. Most of them, including Cardinal Malula of Kinshasa, have done the bulk of their studies locally. They have not been whitewashed in Rome to speak Italian and love Romanità, and they do not depend heavily on Rome's financing. They give the impression of being independent and self-made men, proud of their traditions and strong in their faith. (None of the above applies to the East African Catholic hierarchy; the East Africans are called more Roman than the pope.)

John Paul II had accepted Zaire's invitation to celebrate its Second Evangelization's Centenary, 1880-1980. In 1880, Monsignor Lavigerie, archbishop of Algiers and founder of the White Fathers, gave up hope of his priests ever reaching the black masses by crossing the Sahara, and so he expedited a first caravan out of Zanzibar to the great lakes region of Central Africa. In 1885, King Leopold II of Belgium received clearance to create his Independent State of the Congo, a kind of personal fiefdom, and the Vatican declared that Belgian missionaries should evangelize it. The Jesuits arrived from Belgium to evangelize from the Inkisi to the Kwilu River. The Trappists received the Equator Region in 1899, and the Sacred Heart Fathers were given Upper Zaire around Kisangani. In 1901, the Mill Hill Fathers of Holland took on the difficult interior mission posts.

Statistics for the Catholic mission enterprise indicate that as of 1979 there were 711 Zairean priests, 513 brothers, 1,986 sisters, and 924 major seminarians.

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*James F. Conway lives in Kinshasa, Zaire, and serves as Secretary for Development for the Protestant Churches of Zaire.*

There are still 5,000 foreign missionaries in Zaire, but many are in the technical fields of medical and educational assistance. The pope would praise this great mission effort. Zaire, the oldest child of the Church in black Africa, has been called by the British historian Warren Hastings "the true heart of Catholic Africa."

Behind every Zairean bishop even today is a fleet of rock-ribbed, loyal Flemish clergymen. Known for hard work, endurance, and organizational skill, they persist in every corner of Zaire. (Most Protestant missionaries turned over the keys to their Zairean counterparts in the 1960s.)

Cardinal Malula, recognizing the difficulties of celibacy among the Bantu peoples, has wisely undertaken to build up a strong movement of laity, based on parish catechists and deacons. Many people know Zaire through the *Misa Luba*, the African Mass of the 1960s—sung in Latin but with African rhythms and tom-tom accompaniment. Catholicism in Zaire is still notably strong among the Luba peoples who inhabit today the eastern and western Kasai regions. A late '70s version of the adapted liturgy has come to be known as the "Zaire rite."

The journalists on the airplane asked the pope if he would say a Mass in the Zaire rite, perhaps using palm wine and manioc. The pope answered that that there had not been much popular request for that kind of thing in Zaire. And, indeed, the traditional vernacular post-Vatican II Mass is said in most churches of Zaire on any given Sunday. Will the pope and the Congregation of Rites allow the Zaire rite to grow? Is this Africanization?

The present successor of Peter in the See of Rome is already renowned for his doctrinal conservatism. And true to form, John Paul II held the line for clerical celibacy in a continent where numerous priests live in open concubinage, supported by their congregations and ignored by their bishops. On the question of polygamy and the laity, John Paul held up the example of Christian monogamous marriage as the ideal most fitting to man's nature. Many priests in Africa are baptizing polygamous men who want to become Christians without swearing them to give up their second or third wife. Whether monogamy is an essential, infallible, and unquestionable Gospel value is another topic that will affect the Africanization issue. Interestingly, President Mobutu Sese Seko of Zaire, who lost his wife some two years ago, had his marriage blessed in church one day before the pope's arrival. Mobutu already has four children by this second wife.

John Mbiti, a native African theologian, argues that African man is by nature "homo religiosus." European man has had his faith weakened in the face of secularism, skepticism, and a few other isms, but African man has retained a full sense of communion with the divine. He suggests therefore that Kinshasa, and not Geneva, should be the seat of world Protestantism; that Kampala (this before Idi Amin), and not Rome, should be the seat of Catholicism. That would truly be an Africanization of Christianity.

Pope John Paul II urged African nations to deepen their personalities in reflecting on their cultures. In this he certainly gave credence to Mobutu's doctrine of

African authenticity. All Zaireans are called "citizen," not "Mr.," and by 1965 all places bore once again their original tribal names. Cardinal Malula had refused at the time to rebaptize people with new names, a procedure that would have implied that the first baptism was invalid, but he did agree to baptize new Christians with tribal names. The pope saluted the custom of using pre-Christian tribal names as genuinely African.

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John Paul then flew to Kisangani to pay homage to some Zaireans martyred in 1965 during a rebellion in the area. Among these is a Zairean nun named Sister Marie-Clementine Annuarite of the Congregation of the Holy Family in Bafwaba. She is already a popular figure, and not a few people carry an image of her and read a kind of comic book that relates the story of her life.

The pope left Zaire with the local African names for God on his tongue: *Nzambe* in Lingala; *Nzambi* in Kikongo; *Nzakomba* in Mongo; *Mungu* in Kiswahili; and *Maweja Mvidi-Mukula* in Tshiluba. And he had prayed with the Zairean people.

#### **CHRISTIANITY AND MARXISM**

Monday, May 5 saw the indefatigable pontiff, the former archbishop of Communist Krakow, Poland, set sail across the Stanley Pools of the Congo River for the short run from Kinshasa to its twin capital, Brazzaville. On the "left" bank he was greeted by an African rock band that played "*Christus vincit, Christus regnat,*" while on the bandstand there were red flags emblazoned with a hammer and hoe. President Denis Sassou-N'guesso greeted the pope as he stepped from the ferry. A short exchange assured the two that "both systems seek the same goal...the well-being of man."

The People's Republic of the Congo is not well known to the outside world. No U.S. citizen was allowed to set foot there for some sixteen years after its independence from France. It began as a kind of Chinese experiment in Africa, its young leaders taking a Maoist turn. Ironically, the first president was a Catholic priest, Abbé Fulbert Youlou, overthrown in a palace coup. He had turned to the French for aid but was left

to stew in his own problems.

No systematic effort was ever made to persecute or harass religion or religious practice in this country, other than the nationalization of all schools in 1965. In Congo, Brazzaville, as nowhere else in the Marxist world, a believing Christian may participate in the affairs of the ruling Communist party at the highest levels. Catholics here number 450,000, Protestants 232,000, and Kimbanguists (a popular Christian cult, so numerous it is now looked upon as a church) 100,000. John Paul II chose well when he selected this nation as the only "leftist-socialist" country he would visit. He did not take the occasion of his half-day in Brazzaville to expiate on social justice, liberty, or the Christian-Marxist dialogue. He simply showed his willingness to visit and converse with the country's leaders, to salute its masses, pray with them, and praise the traditions of the country. And he spoke of collaboration between church and state for the well-being of all citizens.

It was significant that the only African cardinal to step out of the Alitalia airmobile accompanying the pope was Cardinal Bernardin Gantin, a handsome Fon tribesman from Benin, once Dahomey. Doubly significant for Africa is Gantin's new post as president of the Pontifical Commission for Justice and Peace. His hand was evident in the keynote address of the pope at the airport in Kinshasa, which set the tone for his entire visit in Africa. The pope expressed the wish that each child of Africa "might be able to find bodily and spiritual nourishment in a climate of justice, security, and concord." In the same address John Paul greeted "those who suffer bodily or spiritually...those who work for the common good of their fellow citizens."

He rejoiced with "those who have taken their destiny in their own hands...those nations that have a long way to go yet to forge their unity, to deepen their personality and their culture, and realize the development that imposes itself upon them in so many areas...this development which must be in the context of justice and with the participation and interest of all concerned. To attain this goal, Africa has need of disinterested aid, independence, and peace." These themes were picked up by the Congo press and relayed to the masses in Brazzaville.

### **MORE TO COME?**

John Paul showed sensitivity to what could be interpreted as a snub from Rome and was quick to apologize to those countries that had invited him but he would not be visiting. He assured them there would be another visit.

He might have stopped in Zimbabwe to salute the "via pacifica" solution to that nation's political problems, or in Botswana, Lesotho, or even the Republic of South Africa to say a word against apartheid and encourage the brave Catholic bishops and Protestant leaders who oppose it. But his message against racism was read in Kinshasa, the most southerly point on his itinerary.

It was the omission of Lusophone Africa that provided the most serious break with history and protocol and belies deeper conflicts. The Portuguese colonies, newly independent, often had to battle both church and state

for their freedom. Where was Rome during their struggle? What had Rome said in support of independence in Portuguese Africa? Angola, Mozambique, Guinea-Bissau, and Cape Verde are historically and culturally Catholic, and now their citizens are trying to adapt to the new regimes.

Some idea of the depths of the problem is indicated by excerpts from a 1978 dialogue between Mozambique's President Samora Machel and the country's Catholic bishops. In the president's words:

The Roman Catholic Church in Mozambique has been historically allied with colonialism and fascism. It has been intrinsically involved with the whole action of domination, subjugation, deculturalization, oppression, and massacre of the people. It has been intimately linked with the colonial war of aggression to prevent the liberation of the Mozambican people. Today it presents itself on the side of the forces opposed to the advance of the revolution and is trying to win that which colonialism and imperialism lost on the field of battle. Your excellencies are not going to oppose this [IDOC Documentation Service, July-September, 1979].

Even more devastating is the final passage of Samora Machel's exchange with the bishops:

Do not attempt to present yourselves as judges and as the supreme court of our society. Above all, "give to Caesar that which is Caesar's" and keep for yourselves that which is God's. Leave Caesar alone, leave the Council of the Party alone, leave the meetings of the masses, leave the discussion about socialism, about the paths of socialism, about the strategies of socialism alone.

The World Council of Churches had supported liberation in the African Portuguese colonies in general, and the Mozambique Liberation Front (FRELIMO) in particular. Members of the WCC, along with many African Protestant church leaders, were invited to the independence celebrations in Maputo. And, in fact, Protestants are far more trusted and respected by the regime than are Catholics. Will John Paul II continue the open, person-to-person dialogue with Marxists initiated by John XXIII? As yet John Paul has not chosen to deal with this complex problem.

A short stopover in Guinea-Bissau, where Paulo Freire, the well-known Brazilian Catholic educator and social reformer, was asked to introduce his technique for "consciousness raising," would have been an ideal way for the pope to show his solicitude for Lusophone Africa. Such a gesture would have linked the pope's African junket more closely with his trip to Puebla, Mexico, where liberation and social justice were the burning issues of that 1978 meeting. The moment is gone.

The charismatic pope has succeeded in touching the heart of black Africa, more so than any of his predecessors, only one of whom ever visited the continent. But will he touch the head? Will he address directly the issues of Africanization, of Marxian socialism, and of Islam in an open and dialogical way so as to promote harmony and concord on the continent? When will he return and complete the voyage? 