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Pope visits voodoo heartland

WARM WELCOME Benedict warns against submission to market

COTONOU (BENIN)

Pope Benedict XVI arrived in Benin to a joyous welcome on Friday in a nation considered a voodoo heartland and warned against “unconditional submission” to the market and finance.

Residents lined the streets as Benedict passed in his popemobile, including women wearing skirts with his picture. Even fishermen saluted the pope with paddles from their boats in a lagoon.

The three-day visit will culminate with a mass today in a stadium here, the West African nation’s economic capital, and also take the 84-year-old pontiff to Ouidah, a city which is the centre of voodoo and also served as a major slave trading port.

“Modernity must not cause fear, but it cannot be built by forgetting the past,” Benedict said in a speech after his arrival from Rome.

“It must be accompanied by prudence in avoiding the pitfalls. For example, the unconditional submission to the laws of the market or finance.”

Benedict also spoke of avoiding “nationalism or tribalism that can become deadly” as well as the fuelling of religious tensions.

He made his way to the cathedral here after arriving. Benedict received a warm welcome at the cathedral, which was decorated in yellow and white fabric. He prayed for Mary to “fulfil the noblest aspirations of African youths, fulfil the hearts that hunger for justice, peace and reconciliation, and fulfil the hopes of child victims of hunger and war”.

His trip is likely to bring into focus the enormous potential of many nations on a continent with the world’s fastest growing number of Catholics, and also its numerous struggles. The pope may face questions over the Church’s stance on condoms, after his comments on his first African trip to Cameroon and Angola in 2009 caused an outcry when he said condom distribution aggravated the AIDS problem.

He has since seemed to ease that stance, saying in a book last year that condom use is acceptable “in certain cases”, notably to reduce the risk of HIV infection. Sub-Saharan

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Africa is home to nearly 70 per cent of the world's HIV cases.

The Vatican has also faced a challenge from Pentecostal and other evangelical movements.

Benin is seen as a stronghold of Catholicism, though voodoo beliefs often mix with Christianity in the country of some nine million.

The Benin Catholic Church has also dealt with a string of scandals involving priests recently, ranging from corruption to exorcism.

The highlight of the pope's trip was the signing of an apostolic exhortation called "The Pledge for Africa". The document, a summary of the conclusions of the synod of African bishops in 2009, is also expected to refer to the problems of unequal development, corruption, poverty and the rise of an alternative Christian movement.

AFP



Benin President **Thomas Yayi Boni** (left) greeting **Pope Benedict XVI** at Bernadin Gantin Airport on his arrival for a three day visit. AFP