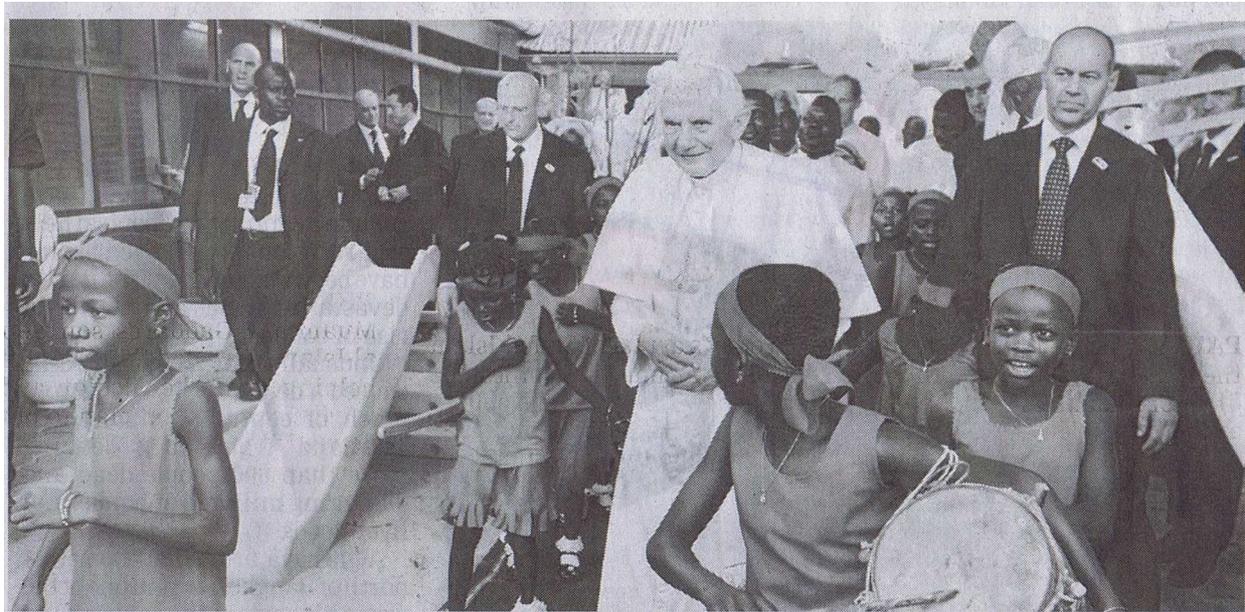


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PLEDGING FOR AFRICA: Pope Benedict XVI (centre) walks alongside children at Saint Rita's Parish in Cotonou. — AFP photo

Pope celebrates giant mass in voodoo heartland

COTONOU: Pope Benedict XVI celebrated mass at a stadium hosting tens of thousands yesterday in the voodoo heartland of Benin, wrapping up a visit that saw him sign off on a grand vision for his church's future in Africa.

More than 30,000 people filled the stadium in Cotonou, the economic capital of Benin, a country considered both the heartland of voodoo and a bastion of Catholicism — and where the two religions often mix.

Benedict arrived at the stadium in his popemobile amid a joyous welcome from the faithful, many wearing skirts or wraps with his picture. The 84-year-old pope received warm cheers when he took a baby in his arms.

Before his arrival, the crowd applauded each time the sun appeared from behind the clouds, some crying out, "Jesus!" and "Thank God!"

"I see Christ even inside the sun!" said Francine Bodjrenou,

43.

The mass capped off a three-day visit by the pontiff to the West African nation, his second trip to the continent, before his departure on Sunday afternoon.

On Saturday, he signed off on a roadmap for the Roman Catholic Church in Africa at a basilica in the city of Ouidah, a centre of voodoo, with the Temple of Pythons and its 30-odd snakes just across the street.

The document signed by Benedict — an apostolic exhortation called "The Pledge for Africa" containing conclusions from a 2009 synod of African bishops — includes peace, reconciliation and justice as its main message.

It calls for good governance, the abolition of the death penalty and denounces abuses, particularly against women and children, while describing AIDS as a mainly ethical problem that requires a medical response.

Changes in behaviour are needed

to combat the disease, including sexual abstinence and rejection of promiscuity, it adds.

The Catholic Church's position on AIDS and the use of condoms has long been controversial and carefully scrutinised, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, home to nearly 70 percent of the world's HIV cases.

The pontiff's visit to the country has been heavy in symbolism, in a region that served as a major slave-trading centre and cominh 150 years after what is considered the evangelisation of Benin.

Slaves departing from Ouidah and elsewhere took their traditional voodoo beliefs with them and transplanted them in the Americas.

Benedict's visit also occurred with the Church facing a major challenge from evangelical movements that have made huge gains on the continent, attracting hundreds of thousands of followers.

— AFP