

From Pontiff to Pew (continued):

The third leg of the trip was in Angola, a large country south of the equator, with a centuries-long Christian tradition, linked to Portuguese colonization. Like many African countries, after achieving independence, Angola went through a troubled period, which in its case was marked by a long and bloody civil war. In the crucible of this history, God has guided and purified the Church, increasingly converting her in the service of the Gospel, human promotion, reconciliation and peace. A free Church for a free people! In the Marian Sanctuary of Mamã Muxima – which means “Mother of the Heart” – I felt the beating heart of the Angolan people. And in the various meetings I rejoiced to see so many men and women religious of every age, a prophecy of the Kingdom of heaven in the midst of their people; I saw catechists who dedicate themselves fully to the good of the community; I saw the faces of elderly people weathered by toil and suffering yet radiant with the joy of the Gospel; I saw women and men dancing to the rhythm of songs of praise to the Risen Lord, the foundation of a hope that withstands the disappointments caused by ideologies and the empty promises of the powerful.

This hope demands concrete commitment, and the Church has the responsibility, with the witness and courageous proclamation of the Word of God, to recognize the rights of all and to promote their actual respect. With the Angolan civil authorities, but also with those of other countries, I was able to assure them of the Catholic Church’s willingness to continue making this contribution, particularly in the fields of healthcare and education.

The last country I visited was Equatorial Guinea, 170 years after its first evangelization. With the wisdom of tradition and the light of Christ, the Guinean people have weathered the vicissitudes of their history and, in recent days, in the presence of the Pope, have renewed with great enthusiasm their determination to walk together towards a future of hope.

I cannot forget what happened in the prison in Bata, in Equatorial Guinea: the prisoners sang at the top of their voices a song of thanksgiving to God and to the Pope, asking him to pray “for their sins and their freedom”. I had never seen anything like it. And then they prayed the “Our Father” with me in the pouring rain. A genuine sign of the Kingdom of God! And still in the rain, the great meeting with the young people began in the stadium in Bata. A celebration of Christian joy, with moving testimonies from young people who have found in the Gospel the path to free and responsible growth. This celebration culminated in the Eucharistic celebration the following day,, which fittingly concluded the visit to Equatorial Guinea, as well as to the entire Apostolic Journey.

Dear brothers and sisters, the Pope’s visit is, for the African peoples, a chance to make their voices heard, to express the joy of being God’s people and the hope for a better future, of dignity for each and every one. I am happy to have given them this opportunity, and at the same time I thank the Lord for what they have given me, an immeasurable treasure for my heart and my ministry.