

Pope, opening synod, appeals for peace in Rwanda

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VATICAN CITY, April 10 (Reuter) - African dances, drums and songs filled St Peter's Basilica on Sunday as Pope John Paul opened a synod of Africa's Catholic church and appealed for an end to the slaughter in Rwanda that has marred the gathering.

"Everywhere there is hate, vendetta, brotherly blood spilled. In the name of Christ I beg you, lay down your arms," the Pope said of Rwanda at the end of a mass which opened the synod.

"I address my appeal to all leaders, including the international community, to attempt everything possible to try to stem so much destruction and death," the Pope said.

The synod's ceremonial opening - punctuated by pounding drums, ululating chants and rhythmic dancing - was overshadowed by the events in Rwanda where tens of thousands of people have been killed in tribal fighting.

Fighting erupted after President Juvenal Habyarimana and the president of the neighbouring Burundi were killed on Wednesday in a rocket attack on their plane. The Pope condemned the attack as part of an "unspeakable drama".

"This continent is torn apart by old tension and bloody wars...I feel the need to launch an appeal to stop that homicide of violence," the 73-year-old Pope said earlier in his sermon at the unusual ceremony in the largest church in Christendom.

It was a contrast of cultures as men and women in traditional African dress danced and swayed up the main aisle of the church that is the symbol of Western Christianity, passing Swiss Guards in billowing garb and ambassadors in tuxedos.

Women bore gifts of baskets of fruit and grain during the offertory part of the mass, which the 10,000-strong congregation followed in a booklet illustrated with gospel scenes depicting Christ as a black African with black apostles.

The Pope celebrated the mass with more than 200 bishops, most from Africa. Prayers were read in 15 African languages, including Igbo, Lingala, Swahili, and Yoruba.

At the month-long synod, Catholic bishops from Africa will discuss the problems of the world's poorest continent, including wars, relations with Islam, AIDS and political instability.

The Pope spoke of Africa's problems and hopes for the synod to chart the future of the rapidly-growing African church. But he reserved the strongest words of his sermon for Rwanda.

"I wish to recall in particular the people and the church of Rwanda who these days are being tried by an overwhelming tragedy..." he said.

"With you bishops here present I am sharing this suffering caused by the new catastrophic wave of violence and death...which is making blood flow even from priests, religious sisters and religion teachers, innocent victims of an absurd hatred," the Pope said.

Among the thousands of people reported killed are political leaders, aid workers, nuns, priests, ordinary Rwandans and Belgian U.N. peacekeepers.

"I raise my voice to tell all of you: stop these acts of violence. Stop these tragedies. Stop these fratricidal massacres," the Pope said in the sermon he read in French, English, Portuguese and Italian.

The bishops of Rwanda were not able to attend the opening.

The Pope, whose Western vestments were adorned with geometric African patterns, said he hoped the Church in Rwanda and all Africa would be able to promote an urgent work of reconciliation to turn Africa into a land of peace and love.

"All of Africa is present today in St Peter's Basilica," the Pope said, adding that the church rejoiced that African nations today were free of colonial bonds.

He said sovereignty enabled them to evaluate all that was positive in what Europeans brought to Africa as well as to criticise past suffering and outrages, chief among them slavery.

"If Africa underwent many wrongs by others in history over the centuries we must ask ourselves: What must be done to change this situation?" the Pope said.

In his sermon the Pope condemned "so-called progressive civilisations" and "practices hostile to life imposed by means of economic systems which serve the selfishness of the rich".

This was an apparent attack on development programmes which link economic aid to the promotion of birth control.

The Pope extended special greetings to Moslems in Africa. Relations with Islam, which is growing fast on the continent, is one of the most thorny issues the synod will discuss.

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