

## **BENIN PREPARES TO WELCOME THE POPE**

VATICAN CITY, 15 NOV 2011 (VIS) - A press conference was held yesterday in the Holy See Press Office to present the visit of Benedict XVI to Benin, which is due to begin on Friday 18 November and to come to an end on Sunday 20 November, Solemnity of Christ the King.

Holy See Press Office Director Fr. Federico Lombardi S.J. outlined the most important reasons for the Pope's return to Africa following his 2009 trip to Angola and Cameroon, first among them the signing of the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation of the Second Special Assembly for Africa of the Synod of Bishops. The signing ceremony is due to take place in the presence of thirty-five presidents of national episcopal conferences, and the seven heads of the continent's regional conferences.

Secondly Benin , a small African county of scarcely nine million inhabitants, has always been a place of great spiritual importance for the Church. It was, in fact, from Benin that, 150 years ago, the great work of evangelisation spread into neighbouring countries, from Togo to Ghana and Niger . Thus, Fr. Lombardi explained, the Pope's visit has raised great expectations. "It will certainly arouse an atmosphere of hope for the African Church , and be an encouragement to the continent of Africa as a whole. Naturally, it will emphasise existing problems, but from a positive perspective, underlining commitment to reconciliation, justice and peace, and the announcement of the Gospel as part of man's integral development. In other words, the trip seeks to be extremely constructive".

Another key moment will be the Pope's visit to the tomb of the Beninese Cardinal Bernardin Gantin, who died in 2008 but is still much loved by his people, Fr. Lombardi explained. This affection is shared by the Holy Father because Cardinal Gantin "was very close to the Pope for various reasons, having been prefect of the Congregation for Bishops at the time that Benedict XVI was prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, and having been his immediate predecessor as dean of the College of Cardinals. In Benin he is considered as a national hero, a person who enjoys truly immense public affection. For this reason, the Pope's visit to his tomb will be one of the most significant episodes of the trip".

In closing the director of the Holy See Press Office turned his attention to the artistic and cultural event scheduled to take place in Cotonou on the evening of Friday 18 November. It will bring together three major African singers - Papa Wemba, Bonga and Fifito - in a concert which will have the themes of peace, justice and reconciliation.

You can find more information at: [www.visnews.org](http://www.visnews.org)