Of the many voyages that Pope John Paul II made during his long papacy, the most impressive were to Africa. The only other pope to visit Africa in modern times was Paul VI, who journeyed briefly to Uganda in 1969 to dedicate the site for the Ugandan Martyrs Basilica that honors 22 Catholic victims of persecution. After his election to the papacy in 1978, John Paul II visited 40 of the 53 countries of present-day Africa.

Though each trip had its own objective, there was an overriding theme of reconciliation. Africa has only recently emerged from a colonial past and is engaged in a struggle for modern development against a backdrop of poverty, ethnic warfare, and corrupt government. In my numerous trips across the continent I have observed that Africans still remember Pope John Paul II’s visits proudly, and his message of love and justice was almost always well received by them, whether Catholic or not. Though some of his trips were marred by controversy—and a few by violence—a glimpse at each journey will reveal the power of the pope’s prevailing message.

2-12 May 1980: Zaire, Congo Republic, Kenya, Ghana, Upper Volta, Ivory Coast
10.3 days—11,250 miles

Pope John Paul II made history on his first African pilgrimage, an extensive tour of six West African countries from May 2-12,1980. The pontiff began his African tour in Zaire, a symbolically important country which in 1980 was home to 20% of Africa’s 53 million Catholics. In this vast and troubled country, Roman Catholicism had suffered repression during the long reign of dictator Mobutu Sese Seko. Pope John Paul II was nevertheless received amid much fanfare, and his speeches included a papal statement that the clergy in Zaire must avoid political activity and observe celibacy. The visit was not without tragedy. At Kinshasa, ten people were trampled to death in a crowd that had come to see the pontiff. On May 5, he left Zaire by boat, crossing the mighty Congo River to Brazzaville, capital of the Republic of Congo.

From Central Africa he flew to several countries within the drought-stricken Sahel region. In Ouagadougou he launched a lasting appeal to alleviate poverty and harsh living conditions in the region. This later resulted in the founding of the Jean Paul II Foundation, established on 22 February 1984 with its headquarters in Burkina Faso. Ever since, this foundation funds community projects in the field of rural development and poverty alleviation in areas including Burkina Faso, Cape Verde, the Gambia, Guinea Bissau, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Senegal and Chad—a lasting legacy to the pontiff’s historic first African visit.

12-19 February 1982: Nigeria, Benin, Gabon, Equatorial Guinea
7.3 days—9,150 miles

Almost two years after his first visit to Africa, Pope John Paul II returned on a week-long trip to four countries in the Gulf of Guinea region, including Nigeria, Benin, Gabon and Equatorial Guinea. Exposure to the region’s harsh political context was a hallmark of the trip. The pontiff stopped for 6 hours in Benin, and was surprised when President
Mathieu Kerekou of Benin ended a speech of welcome by shouting, “Ready for the revolution — the struggle continues!” (At the time Benin pursued Marxist-Leninist policies.) After this, in Equatorial Guinea Pope John Paul II was greeted with fervor on his arrival in this heavily Roman Catholic country whose citizens had suffered from both a bloody regime and more than a decade of church persecution.

It was also Pope John Paul II’s first visit to Nigeria, Africa’s most populous country. He said Mass in the stadium at the capital, Lagos, and was received by President Shehu Shagari. He then traveled to Onitsha to bless the sick at St. Charles Borromeo Hospital, speak with priests and seminarians in Enugu, and ordain priests in Kaduna. The Pope also visited the Sts. Peter and Paul major seminary in Ibadan. His message was one of reconciliation amid violent clashes between Nigerian Christians and Muslims, saying “All of us, Christians and Muslims, live under the sun of the one merciful God.” His call to religious harmony and co-existence would be a repeated theme in later visits to Africa.

8-19 August 1985: Togo, Ivory Coast, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Zaire, Kenya, Morocco

11.5 days—15,800 miles

During the summer of 1985, the pontiff toured north and central Africa, visiting Togo, Côte d’Ivoire, Cameroon, Republic of Central Africa, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Kenya and Morocco. While in Togo, Pope John Paul II was so disturbed by his visit to the opulent palace of President Eyadema in Pya, he later broke his schedule to stop at a mud hut and speak with a poor woman about her life and show solidarity with her plight. The incident showed the church’s awareness of “the two realities of Africa.” Later in his trip, on August 11 the Pope offered three African Presidents “an implicit pact,” promising Roman Catholic support in return for respect for freedom, social justice and human life. The Pope delivered his message as he jetted across the continent, traveling some 1,500 miles from Togo to the Ivory Coast and then to Cameroon. In traditional panoply, the pontiff arrived in Bamenda (NW Cameroon), and was welcomed by tribal performers, including some dressed in feathers and playing mankoons and xylophones, as well as masked dancers.

The Pope said Africa had suffered from “fratricidal wars and even in certain cases genocide” and condemned “the injustices committed by certain regimes concerning human rights.” While in Zaire on August 16, Pope John Paul II beatified a Roman Catholic nun slain in 1964, Marie Clementine Anwarite, who would not give up her virginity, in an “audacity worthy of martyrs.” The pope forgave the nun’s killer for the incident, which occurred during the civil war that followed independence in 1960.

10-19 September 1988: Zimbabwe, Botswana, Lesotho, Swaziland, Mozambique

9.5 days—12,800 miles

The pontiff’s fourth African visit was notable on two accounts. First was the Pope’s call for a redoubling of international efforts against hunger, poverty and disease in Africa, made while at a gathering of Roman Catholic lay people at Sacred Heart Cathedral in Harare, Zimbabwe. Secondly, his visit to the region was marred when 69 Roman Catholic pilgrims were taken hostage by rebels opposing Lesotho’s Government, who demanded to see the Pope and King Moshoeshoe II. The incident ended after a 26-hour standoff when a South African anti-terrorist squad stormed the bus of hostages, killing three hijackers and one hostage. After this, the Pope said a solemn Mass in the capital, where some 10,000 worshipers gathered for the beatification ceremony of Br. Joseph
Gerard, a French missionary who lived for 60 years among the Zulu and Basotho people before his death in 1914.

In his last stop, Mozambique, the Pope received the warmest welcome of his five-nation tour. Five thousand people greeted him at Beira when he flew to the central region 450 miles north of the capital, Maputo. Ravaged by a civil war, the Pope offered a message of healing for Mozambique, whose people were living “an ecclesiastical experience of reconciliation with God, with itself and with others.”

28 April–6 May 1989: Madagascar, Reunion, Zambia, Malawi
9.6 days—13,500 miles

The Pope began his fifth African visit in Madagascar, the world’s fifth largest island. Here, he presided over a beatification ceremony honoring Victoire Rasoamanarivo, a local woman who in the 19th century worked to keep the church alive at a time when missionaries were being expelled. The ceremony was attended by several hundred thousand people, who welcomed the pope by singing a lilting hymn in the Malagasy language.

A few days later he arrived in Zambia, where the AIDS pandemic was taking a massive human toll. He sparked controversy by only mentioning AIDS’ moral aspects—a belief that some have brought disease upon themselves through sexual practices not condoned by the church. The Pope completed his nine-day African trip in Malawi. By the time of his fifth visit, the number of African Catholics had swelled to some 75 million, 22 million more than the Pope’s first visit to Africa in 1980.

25 January–1 February 1990: Cape Verde, Guinea Bissau, Mali, Burkina Faso
7.3 days—9,000 miles

In late January the Pope began his sixth African journey, visiting the windswept Cape Verde Islands, then Guinea-Bissau and Mali, all considered among the world’s most impoverished and least developed nations. Mali’s capital, Bamako, lies along the banks of the majestic River Niger, and the welcome for the Pope was incredibly warm for a Muslim country where Catholics make up only 1% of the population.

His last stop on this trip was Burkina Faso, site of the Pope’s Foundation for the Sahel, set up following his first visit to Africa.

1–10 September 1990: Tanzania, Rwanda, Burundi, Ivory Coast
9.16 days—11,650 miles

Pope John Paul II began his 7th African trip in Tanzania, and spoke differently this time of the emergence of AIDS as a crippling force across Africa. At that time it affected one million in Tanzania alone. He stated that the disease demanded a “supreme effort of cooperation among governments as well as the scientific and medical communities.”

Following this the pope visited Burundi, one of the most densely populated African countries. The pontiff celebrated Mass in
Gitega, Burundi’s second largest city, and urged Catholics there to combat the problems caused by overpopulation through improved agriculture and natural family planning methods. In tiny Rwanda—where in just a few years nearly 1/5 of the population would die in a politically-motivated genocide—the archbishop of Kigali was forced to resign from the Central Committee of the MRND ruling party as a result direct pressure from the Vatican. He had been the chairman since his enthronement as archbishop in 1976.

The Pope’s last stop of his seventh African sojourn was Ivory Coast to consecrate the Basilica of Our Lady of Peace in Yamoussoukro. It was constructed between 1985 and 1989 at a cost of US$300 million, sparking much controversy as a lavish building amidst an impoverished region where only a minority of homes have running water and adequate sanitation. The cost of the basilica doubled the national debt of Côte d’Ivoire.


8.25 days—6,200 miles

The most memorable moment of the pontiff’s 1992 trip to the West African countries of Senegal, Guinea and the Gambia came as JPII stood in the ancient slave building on Gorée Island, referring to the site as an “African shrine of Black pain” during his visit to Dakar, Senegal’s capital city. There, John Paul II asked pardon for “the horrible aberration of those who had reduced to slavery the brothers and sisters whom the Gospel had destined for freedom.”

This may have been the most public denunciation by the Vatican of slavery, though by no means was it the first. In his book, *The Popes and Slavery*, Father Joel Panzer notes that JPII was just the most recent of at least five centuries of popes to condemn the practice of slavery; from Pope Eugene IV protesting the capturing of Canary Islanders in 1435, to Leo XIII urging Brazilian bishops to work for the abolition of slavery, popes have firmly reinforced the condemnations issued by their predecessors. Local bishops and lay people, of course, often disregarded these pronouncements.

**4-10 June 1992: Angola, São Tomé e Príncipe**

6.3 days—10,500 miles

The Pope’s visit to Angola in 1992 came just over a year after the first peace agreement in that country and marked a dramatic reversal of Angola’s relations with the Church. Under the Marxist regime installed at independence in 1975, the church suffered years of repression as civil war engulfed warring factions. While in Angola, Pope John Paul II urged Angola’s Roman Catholics today to fill a “spiritual vacuum” left by Marxism. From Angola, the Pope stopped briefly in the island nation of São Tomé and Principe, another former Portuguese colony, located in the Gulf of Guinea. Africa’s second-smallest country (after Seychelles), São Tomé and Principe are 80% Catholic. Still, informal polygamy is widespread and the country has the world’s highest rate of births out of wedlock. Most of the pope’s time here was spent condemning the practice.
3-10 February 1993: Benin, Uganda, Sudan
7.6 days—9,500 miles

In February 1993 Pope John Paul II embarked on his tenth African visit. He first arrived in Benin, and continued his theme of dialogue, meeting with religious and voodoo leaders on the eve of opening of the International Voodoo Art and Culture Festival in Ouidah. (This caused traditionally-minded Western Catholics to criticize the pope’s African travels for the first time; in their view, the pope went too far in allowing himself to be photographed with witch doctors and praising animism as containing the “seeds of the Word.”)

The pontiff then made his way across the continent to Uganda, where Catholics were almost half of the country’s 17 million people. In Kampala, the capital, the Pope created three additional archdioceses to better minister to Uganda’s growing population. He also visited Gulu, in the north, to encourage a peaceful settlement to the ongoing conflict there. From Uganda, the Pope then traveled to Sudan for a nine-hour stopover at the end of his 10th African tour. Here, the Pope emphasized respect for human rights in his meetings, saying “Rigorous respect for the right to religious freedom is a major source and foundation of peaceful coexistence.”

The pontiff later addressed priests and nuns at Khartoum Cathedral, and evoked the Crucifixion, saying, “In this part of Africa I see clearly a particular reproduction of the mystery of Calvary in the lives of the majority of the Christian people.” He then held an open air Mass for a crowd of thousands in the capital city’s main square before departing for Rome.

6.25 days—10,500 miles

Perhaps the most memorable snapshot of the Pope’s eleventh African visit was his image addressing a million people in Nairobi’s Uhuru Park, amidst colorful local pageantry, drums, and dance that were typical of his African journeys. During his trip, Pope John Paul II also made public appeals for an end to the bloodshed in Rwanda and Burundi and said that forgiveness and reconciliation were the only solution to ethnic conflicts. His message here had special resonance since the 1994 massacres in Rwanda deeply affected the Roman Catholic Church, which came under intense criticism for the role of certain clergy in the ensuing political bloodshed.

15 April 1996: Tunisia (green)
.5 days—800 miles

Pope John Paul II made a one-day trip across the Mediterranean to Tunisia on April 15, 1996, to promote a message of religious tolerance toward the Islamic world. Tunisia, an overwhelmingly Muslim country of 8.7 million people, is widely seen as a tolerant and progressive country, unscarred by the violent Islamic fundamentalism afflicting its neighbors. The Pope used his second trip to an Arab country to denounce religious fanaticism, saying “None can kill in the name of God, none can accept the infliction of death on his brother,”
the Pope told a gathering of bishops from four North African countries, Algeria, Tunisia, Morocco and Libya. The trip was very brief, due to the pontiff’s ailing health. The 75-year-old Pope held a meeting in the ancient Roman amphitheatre in Carthage, where he addressed some members of Tunisia’s Catholic population of 18,000, mostly foreigners, which the Pope described as a “small, fragile flock.”

21 March 1998: Nigeria (red)
2.5 days—5,500 miles

The 77-year-old Pope visited Nigeria in 1998 some 16 years after his first visit to this country. During his journey, he once again encouraged the citizens of this ethnically-diverse country to respect human rights, much as he had in his previous visit. Addressing a crowd of nearly three-quarters of a million at a Mass outside the capital, Abuja, the pope affirmed that the Catholic Church symbolized justice and love—but noted that there are duties as well as rights of citizens and government. “Respect for every human person, for his dignity and rights, must ever be the inspiration and guiding principle behind your efforts to increase democracy and strengthen the social fabric of your country.” During his visit the Pope beatified Cyprian Tansi, a Cistercian educator who was one of the earliest native priests ordained in Nigeria.

24 February 2000: Egypt (blue)
2.5 days—3,000 miles

In February 2000 Pope John Paul II made his last trip to the African continent. In a poignant and mystical pilgrimage, the Pope traveled to Egypt to the remote monastery of St. Catherine, at the base of Mount Sinai in order to walk in the footsteps of Moses at the place where God is said to have given him the Ten Commandments. An underlying objective of the pope’s three-day visit was to try to overcome old rifts with Orthodox Christians, the largest religious minority in predominantly Muslim Egypt.

John Paul II’s African trips forged a new, dynamic relationship between the Vatican and Africa that endures today. Several decades ago, it seemed inconceivable that the future growth of the church would depend on Africa or that new clout among African cardinals would be a key determining influence in the selection of future pontiffs. These events reveal the enduring legacy of JPII’s masterful outreach to a growing continent.