

Pope asks African church to work urgently for peace

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VATICAN CITY, April 10 (AFP) - Pope John Paul II urged Africa's Roman Catholic church to work urgently for peace at the opening of a special assembly of African churchmen Sunday, as ethnic violence continued in Rwanda.

Speaking to the synod, the first ever called for the African church, the pope asked them to "work to promote an urgent and radical reconciliation effort, to help make the African continent a land where peace and love of life reigns."

The pope regretted the absence of the four bishops from Rwanda and the killings there of priests, nuns and church followers whom he described as "innocent victims of an absurd hatred."

He begged the warring parties there to put down their arms, asking them and the international community to do everything possible to end the fighting.

"Together with you, I raise my voice to tell all of you: stop these acts of violence! Stop these tragedies! Stop these fratricidal massacres!" he said at a mass marking the beginning of the synod.

"We can only be profoundly troubled by this dramatic contrast between love and hate, between love of life and terror, between solidarity and fratricidal war, between life and death."

The synod, attended by 311 African clergymen including more than 200 cardinals and bishops, will end on May 8 with a "message to the people of God" directed at African Catholics.

A choir of 400 priests and seminarians led Sunday's liturgy in 15 different African languages, while the 5,000-strong congregation danced to the rhythm of percussion instruments and presented the pontiff with baskets of African food.

"Today, the bishop of Rome welcomes the African church wherever it may be - in the immensity of the Sahara, the depths of the savannah, the mystery of the tropical forests. The Church of Rome bows before the African people," he declared.

The pope encouraged dialogue in Africa with other Christian churches and the Islamic faith, and asked the assembly to consider the application of the church's social doctrine to the specific needs of Africa.

This was a possible reference to the church's strict position on ways to fight the fatal disease AIDS, which has hit several African countries hard.

The pope has said that he will travel to three different countries in Africa to announce the results of the synod. The papal visit to the as yet unnamed countries will take place in late 1994 or 1995.

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