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Papal preacher's remarks light firestorm

Father Cantalamessa reads letter from Jewish friend comparing attacks on papacy to anti-Semitism



Giampiero Sposito / CNS

Pope Benedict XVI uncovers a crucifix as he leads the Good Friday Liturgy of the Lord's Passion in St. Peter's Basilica.

By Carol Glatz
VATICAN CITY (CNS)

In his homily during the Good Friday Liturgy of the Lord's Passion in St. Peter's Basilica April 2, Capuchin Father Raniero Cantalamessa focused on the Christian response to violence, particularly violence by men against women.

At the service, presided over by Pope Benedict XVI, Father Cantalamessa said he did not want to talk about priestly sexual abuse and the scandal it has provoked, but he did so at the end of his homily.

Father Cantalamessa mentioned recent criticism of the Church, the Pope, and Catholics around the world. These parenthetical comments became the focus of further criticism.

While he did not specifically mention the issue of sexual abuse, it was obvious he was referring to the increase in criticism, especially in the media, of how the

Church and Pope Benedict have handled past cases of sexual abuse by priests.

Father Cantalamessa read a portion of a letter from an unnamed Jewish friend, who, the priest said, like many Jewish people, "knows from experience what it means to be victims of collective violence."

The letter condemned attacks against the Church, the Pope, and the faithful; the use of stereotypes; and turning individual responsibilities and wrongdoings into a form of collective guilt, saying the current situation reminded the Jewish author of "the most shameful aspects of anti-Semitism."

A number of commentators took this as a likening of attacks on the Church to the Holocaust, and something of an uproar began in the media.

In the main portion of his homily, Father Cantalamessa denounced continued violence and

brutality in the world, calling it "an archaic leftover, a regression to primitive times." He listed some modern forms of violence, including bullying in schools and violence in films, video games, and the media.

He added that he wanted to talk about "violence against women," saying abused women "find themselves desperately alone and defenceless. Only today, thanks to the support and encouragement of so many associations and institutions, some find the strength to come out in the open and denounce the guilty," he said.

When God admonished Eve after the fall in the Garden of Eden and said that her husband "shall be your master," Father Cantalamessa said God's words were "a bitter prediction, not authorization" or consent of aggression.

See Benedict's Preacher, Page 8 □

Defence of Pope wasn't co-ordinated, and it showed

By John Thavis
VATICAN CITY (CNS)

The Roman Curia's headline-grabbing defence of Pope Benedict XVI's handling of the clerical sex abuse scandal has demonstrated that when it comes to Vatican communications, the Pope is not a micromanager.

Twice during Holy Week liturgies the Pope was caught unawares when his aides spoke passionately about the barrage of criticism the Pontiff and other Church leaders have faced in recent weeks on the sex abuse issue.

One official compared the attacks on the Church and the Pope to "the most shameful aspects of anti-Semitism," while another

said the Church would survive the "current petty gossip."

What Pope Benedict thought of these interventions was not clear, but in both cases, the remarks had the unintended effect of upstaging his own spiritual message about the meaning of Christ's Passion and Easter.

From the outside, the Vatican's verbal rallying around the Pope was viewed as an orchestrated campaign to counter his critics. If there was orchestration, however, it wasn't directed by the Pope.

Capuchin Father Raniero Cantalamessa, the preacher of the papal household, basically has an open mike every time he steps up to sermonize for the Pope and

the Roman Curia. He also has a penchant for weaving in current events, so it was probably not a complete surprise when he began talking about the priestly sex abuse scandal at the Pope's Good Friday liturgy April 2.

But when, quoting a Jewish friend, he likened criticism of Church leaders to past efforts to pin "collective guilt" on Jews, he sparked an outcry heard around the world.

Amazingly, Pope Benedict and other Vatican officials had no inkling that Father Cantalamessa would put forward such a comparison.

"No one at the Vatican has ever demanded to read the texts of my

homilies in advance, which is something I consider a great act of trust in me and in the media," Father Cantalamessa said afterward.

As usual, Jesuit Father Federico Lombardi, the Vatican spokesman, was assigned clean-up duty. Hours after the liturgy, he issued a statement saying the Capuchin's analysis "was not the position of the Holy See."

On Easter Sunday, at the beginning of the papal Mass in St. Peter's Square, another salvo came from Cardinal Angelo Sodano, dean of the College of Cardinals.

In an unprecedented salutation to Pope Benedict, Cardinal Sodano extolled the Pontiff as the "unfailing rock" of the Church, praised

the 400,000 priests who serve generously around the world and then said: "Holy Father, the people of God are with you, and they do not allow themselves to be impressed by the current petty gossip, or by the ordeals that occasionally strike the community of believers."

The Pope rose and embraced Cardinal Sodano. In this instance, too, the Pope had not been informed ahead of time about a text that soon would be making headlines.

"I can exclude that the Pope requested or saw in advance the text of Cardinal Sodano's greeting," Father Lombardi told Catholic News Service. □