

B.C.

Benedict's preacher deserves better

When nuanced remarks on Pope's troubles are taken out of context, no surprise that outrage results

By C.S. Morrissey
Special to The B.C. Catholic

Capuchin Father Raniero Cantalamessa, preacher to the Pontifical Household, has been widely condemned for allegedly comparing recent criticism of Pope Benedict XVI with anti-Semitism. (See stories Page 13.)

In his remarks in a Good Friday sermon at the Vatican, delivered in front of the Pope, Father Cantalamessa quoted from the letter of a sympathetic Jewish friend who wrote of “the use of stereotypes” and the attribution of a stereotypical “collective guilt” to “the Church, the Pope, and all the faithful” by those with an anti-Christian mindset who engage in “violent and concentric attacks against” Christians.

“If – and it was not my intention to do so – I hurt the sensitivities of Jews and victims of pedophilia, I am truly sorry and I ask for forgiveness,” Father Cantalamessa said in an Easter interview with Italy’s *Corriere della Sera* newspaper, in which he made clear the Pope had not known in advance what he had been going to say.

All the outrage directed at Father Cantalamessa has missed the real story here, which is that Father Cantalamessa dared to deliver a sensitive, highly nuanced sermon to the Pope that aimed at nothing less than uncovering the human psychology that underpins all violence and abuse.

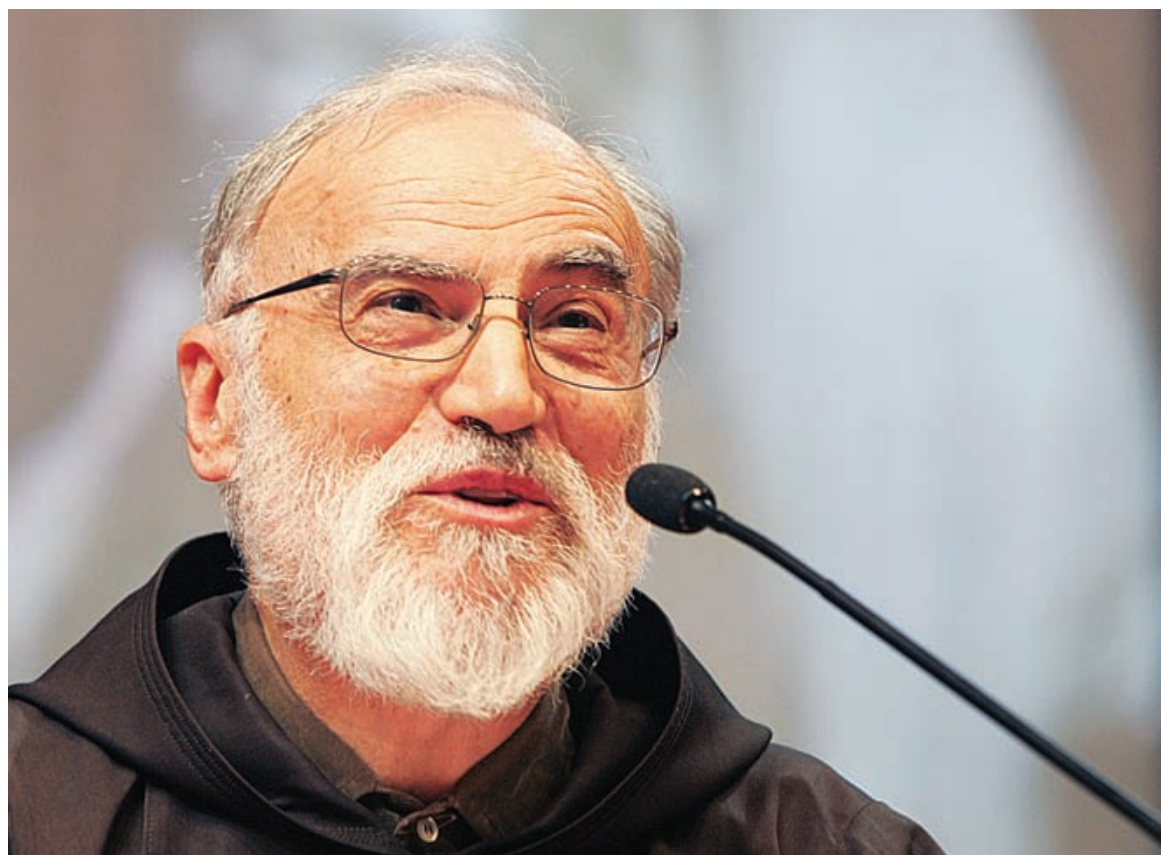
To this end Father Cantalamessa presented the ideas of Stanford University emeritus professor Rene Girard, who was named not long ago to the Academie Francaise as one of its 40 “immortal” French thinkers.

Father Cantalamessa opined that Girard “has unveiled the matrix that sparks the mechanism of violence: mimicry, that innate human inclination to consider desirable the things that others desire and, hence,

to repeat the things that they see others do.”

The preacher was describing Girard’s psychology of all human desire. Consider the responses to promotional hype for Apple iPads, or the responses to anti-Semitic propaganda. Human desire in each instance will follow some path of mimicry. No, the two responses

“**We imitate, for good or ill.**”



Emanuela De Meo / Catholic Press Photo / CNS

Capuchin Father Raniero Cantalamessa, preacher to the papal household, speaks during a meeting in 2009 in Assisi, Italy. Columnist Morrissey describes him as “an interlocutor of good will, a reasonable man abundant with charity, seriously engaging complex issues.”

are certainly not morally equivalent, but yes, they do each have a common root in the very nature of human desire.

Along these lines, psychiatrist Jean-Michel Oughourlian, in his new book, *The Genesis of Desire*, carefully analyzes the structure of human desire as a “universal mimesis,” giving illuminating examples from his 40 years of clinical practice.

Media reports, however, multiplied outraged responses to Father Cantalamessa, who, in speaking of “our Jewish brothers,” said: “They know from experience what it means to be victims of collective violence and also because of this they are quick to recognize the recurring symptoms.”

Please note a difference here:

between the collective violence of the Holocaust itself, and a mere symptom of another persecution. Father Cantalamessa, in his remarks, was simply highlighting the heightened sensitivity of careful observers to the potential symptoms of an incipient, polarizing, mimetic frenzy.

Father Cantalamessa was not drawing a moral equivalence between the news media’s defamation of the Pope and the unparalleled horrors of the Holocaust. He was describing a common structure in all human desire: imitation, “that innate human inclination,” universal across the entire range of moral phenomena.

We imitate, for good or ill. If for ill, then there are symptoms of such “bad imitation” that are

psychologically common across even morally unequal actions (like shopping, reporting, or genocide).

It’s a subtle point, and you may think you indignantly disagree with the thesis, but please, at least read the preacher’s calm and gentle meditation first in its entirety. Can you not recognize here an interlocutor of good will, a reasonable man abundant with charity, seriously engaging complex issues?

Imitation doesn’t have to be negative, but it often is. The highly stereotyped media responses to Father Cantalamessa’s learned homily on human psychology would seem to be a case in point.

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