

Vatican Priest Likens Criticism Over Abuse to Anti-Semitism

By DANIEL J. WAKIN and RACHEL DONADIO, New York Times, 2 April 2010

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ROME — A senior Vatican priest, speaking before Pope Benedict XVI at a Good Friday service, compared the world's outrage at sexual abuse scandals in the Catholic Church to the persecution of the Jews, prompting angry responses from victims' advocates and consternation from Jewish groups.



Rev. Raniero Cantalamessa, preacher of the papal household since 1980, giving a service at the Vatican on March 5.

The Vatican spokesman quickly distanced the Vatican from the remarks, which came on the day Christians mark the Crucifixion. They underscored how much the Catholic Church has felt under attack from recent news reports and from criticism over how it has handled charges of child molesting against priests in the past.

The pope and his bishops have denounced abuses in the church, but many prelates and Vatican officials have lashed back at news reports that Benedict failed to act strongly enough against pedophile priests, once as archbishop of Munich and Freising in 1980 and once as a leader of the Vatican's powerful Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

The Vatican has denied that he was at fault, and Vatican officials have variously described the reports as “deceitful,” an effort to undermine the church and a “defamatory campaign.”

Speaking in St. Peter's Basilica, the priest, the Rev. Raniero Cantalamessa, took note that Easter and Passover fell during the same week this year, and said he was led to think of the Jews.

“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,” said Father Cantalamessa, who serves under the title of preacher of the papal household. Then he quoted from what he said was a letter from a Jewish friend he did not identify.

“I am following the violent and concentric attacks against the church, the pope and all the faithful by the whole world,” he said the friend wrote. “The use of stereotypes, the passing from personal responsibility and guilt to a collective guilt, remind me of the more shameful aspects of anti-Semitism.”

Good Friday has traditionally been a fraught day in Catholic-Jewish relations. Until the liberalizing Second Vatican Council in the 1960s, Catholic liturgy included a prayer for the conversion of the Jews, and Catholic teaching held Jews responsible for the Crucifixion.

The Vatican spokesman, the Rev. Federico Lombardi, stressed that Father Cantalamessa’s sermon represented his own thoughts and was not an official Vatican statement.

Father Lombardi said the remarks should not be construed as equating recent criticism of the Catholic Church with anti-Semitism.

“I don’t think it’s an appropriate comparison,” he said. “That’s why the letter should be read as a letter of solidarity by a Jew.”

Yet the official Vatican newspaper, *L’Osservatore Romano*, published the remarks in its Saturday edition, which appeared online on Friday evening.

Even as the priest spoke out against attacks on the church, Archbishop Robert Zollitsch of Freiburg, head of the German Bishops Conference, said Friday that sexual abuse victims were not helped enough “out of a misplaced concern for the reputation of the church.”

The church, he said, was shaken by “the suffering inflicted on the victims, who often for decades could not put their injuries into words.” Bishops around Europe have been offering similar remarks in recent days, following a major statement by the pope on molesting in the Irish church.

Father Cantalamessa’s comments about the Jews came toward the end of a long talk about Scripture, the nature of violence and the sacrifice of Jesus. He also spoke at length about violence against women, but gave only slight mention of the children and adolescents who had been molested by priests. “I am not speaking here of violence against children, of which unfortunately also elements of the clergy are stained; of that there is sufficient talk outside of here,” he said.

Disclosures about hundreds of such cases have emerged in recent months in Germany, Ireland, the Netherlands, Austria and France, after a previous round of scandal in the United States.

A leading advocate for sexual abuse victims in the United States, David Clohessy, called comparing criticism of the church to persecution of the Jews “breathtakingly callous and misguided.”

“Men who deliberately and consistently hide child sex crime are in no way victims,” he said. “And to conflate public scrutiny with horrific violence is about as wrong as wrong can be.”

Another American victims’ advocate rejected the Vatican’s statement distancing itself from the remarks. “Father Cantalamessa chose to equate calumny against the Jewish people as the same as criticism of Pope Benedict,” said Kristine Ward, a spokeswoman for the National Survivor Advocates Coalition. “It is incomprehensible that Father Cantalamessa did this and that Pope Benedict, the ultimate authority in this church who presided at the service, did not stand during the service to disavow this connection to anti-Semitism.”

The comments also ruffled Vatican-Jewish relations, which have often been tense during Benedict’s papacy.

Rabbi Riccardo Di Segni, the chief rabbi of Rome, who was host to Benedict at the Rome synagogue in January on a visit that helped calm waters after a year of tensions, laughed in seeming disbelief when asked about Father Cantalamessa’s remarks.

“With a minimum of irony, I will say that today is Good Friday, when they pray that the Lord illuminate our hearts so we recognize Jesus,” Rabbi Di Segni said, referring to a prayer in the traditional Catholic liturgy calling for the conversion of the Jews. “We also pray that the Lord illuminate theirs.”

Abraham Foxman, the national director of the Anti-Defamation League in the United States, attributed the remarks to ignorance, not malice. “You would think that a senior priest in the church would have a better understanding of anti-Semitism than to make this hideous comparison,” he said.

Benedict caused friction with Jewish groups in 2007 when he issued a ruling making it easier to use the Latin Mass, including that Good Friday prayer. In January 2009, he stirred outrage when he revoked the excommunication of four schismatic bishops, one of whom turned out to have denied the scope of the Holocaust.

Father Cantalamessa's remarks come after weeks of intense scrutiny of Benedict, which some in the Italian news media have seen in conspiratorial terms. Last week, the center-left daily newspaper La Repubblica wrote, without attribution, that "certain Catholic circles" believed the criticism of the church stemmed from "a New York 'Jewish lobby.'"

Father Cantalamessa is a longtime fixture in the papal household, having been appointed its official preacher by Pope John Paul II in 1980. The apostolic preacher, as he also is called, gives meditations — especially during Advent and Lent — for the pope and Vatican hierarchy. The role was established by Pope Paul IV in the middle of the 16th century, and the job was later reserved for a member of the Franciscan Order of Capuchin Friars Minor.

Father Cantalamessa was also tasked to deliver a meditation on the problems facing the church and need for careful consideration to the college of cardinals shortly after the death of John Paul II, as they prepared to elect his successor. Their choice was Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict.

Nicholas Kulish contributed reporting from Berlin.