

Vatican blasts anti-Catholic 'hate' campaign

By FRANCES D'EMILIO (AP) – Apr 6, 2010

VATICAN CITY — The Vatican heatedly defended Pope Benedict XVI on Tuesday, claiming accusations that he helped cover up the actions of pedophile priests are part of an anti-Catholic "hate" campaign targeting the pope for his opposition to abortion and same-sex marriage.

Vatican Radio broadcast comments by two senior cardinals explaining "the motive for these attacks" on the pope and the Vatican newspaper chipped in with spirited comments from another top cardinal.

"The pope defends life and the family, based on marriage between a man and a woman, in a world in which powerful lobbies would like to impose a completely different" agenda, Spanish Cardinal Julian Herranz, head of the disciplinary commission for Holy See officials, said on the radio.

Herranz didn't identify the lobbies but "defense of life" is Vatican shorthand for anti-abortion efforts.

Also arguing that Benedict's promotion of conservative family models had provoked the so-called attacks was the Vatican's dean of the College of Cardinals, Angelo Sodano.

"By now, it's a cultural contrast," Sodano told the Vatican newspaper L'Osservatore Romano. "The pope embodies moral truths that aren't accepted, and so, the shortcomings and errors of priests are used as weapons against the church."

Also rallying to Benedict's side was Italian Cardinal Giovanni Lajolo, who heads the Vatican City State's governing apparatus.

The pope "has done all that he could have" against sex abuse by clergy of minors, Lajolo said on Vatican radio, decrying what he described as a campaign of "hatred against the Catholic church."

Sex abuse allegations, as well as accusations of cover-ups by diocesan bishops and Vatican officials, have swept across Europe in recent weeks. Benedict has been criticized for not halting the actions of abusive priests when he was a Vatican cardinal and earlier while he was the archbishop of Munich in his native Germany.

The mainland European scandals — in Germany, Italy, Austria, Denmark and Switzerland — are erupting after decades of abuse cases in the United States, Canada, Australia, Ireland and other areas.

In Germany, nearly 2,700 people called the church's sexual abuse hotline in the first three days it was operating, a Catholic church spokesman said Tuesday. A team of psychologists and other experts have spoken with 394 people so far, ranging from several minutes up to an hour, Trier Diocese spokesman Stephan Kronenburg said.

"Most callers reported cases of sexual abuse," he told The Associated Press.

Benedict has ignored victims' demands that he accept responsibility for what they say is his own personal and institutional responsibility for failing to swiftly kick abusive priests out of the priesthood, or at least keep them away from children.

But he has been protected by a vanguard of senior Vatican prelates who are fending off what they contend is an orchestrated attempt to attack the leader of the world's more than 1 billion Catholics.

The Vatican No. 2 official, Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, rebuffed questions about the pontiff's silence on the topic, indicating that Benedict was standing firm.

"He's a strong pope," he told reporters after arriving Tuesday in Chile. The Italian news agency ANSA quoted him as calling Benedict a "great prophet of the Third Millennium."

Bertone, now the Holy See's secretary of state but formerly Benedict's deputy when the future pope, then-called Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, headed the Vatican's morals office, has himself been swept up in the scandals.

During a May 1998 meeting at the Vatican, Bertone told Wisconsin bishops to halt a church trial against an ailing priest who was accused of sexually abusing 200 deaf children, according to a Vatican transcript. The priest died soon afterward.

"It's not true, it's not true! We have documented the opposite," ANSA quoted Bertone as saying in Chile. "Let's not talk about this topic now, because otherwise we'll be here all day verifying precisely the action taken by me and by his eminence."

On Easter, the most important day in the Catholic faith, the Vatican broke with tradition and began its service in St. Peter's Square with a ringing defense of Benedict delivered by Cardinal Sodano.

The Vatican newspaper quoted Sodano on Tuesday as saying the church is "certainly" suffering because of pedophile priests but he asserted that "Benedict XVI has apologized several times."

"But it's not Christ's fault if Judas betrayed" him, Sodano said. "It's not a bishop's fault if one of his priests is stained by grave wrongdoing. And certainly the pontiff is not responsible."

"Behind the unjust attacks on the pope are visions of the family and of life that run contrary to the Gospel," Sodano said. "Now the accusation of pedophile is being brandished against the church."

He noted that past popes have also been criticized, including the "offensive against Pius XII for his conduct during the last World War as well as that against Paul VI" for his encyclical against birth control, the cardinal said.

Pius has been accused by Jewish groups and some scholars as not having done enough to save Jews from the Holocaust, although the Vatican contends he used behind-the-scene diplomacy to help them. Benedict has hailed Pius as a "great" pontiff, who is being considered for possible beatification.

Vatican Radio, presenting listeners with some of the most vehement counterattacks yet, depicted the church as a victim.

"There are those who fear the media campaign of anti-Catholic hatred can degenerate," Vatican Radio said.

It noted anti-Catholic graffiti on walls of a church outside Viterbo, a town near Rome, and reminded listeners that a bishop was attacked by a man during Easter Mass in Muenster, Germany. The bishop fought back with an incense bowl.

The radio likened the recent campaign to the persecution suffered by early Christian martyrs. "The crowds, incited by the slanders of the powerful, would lynch the Christians," the radio said.

In Munich, meanwhile, an independent lawyer hired by the Catholic church wrapped up his investigation of abuse allegations at the southern Ettal monastery.

"The investigation clearly shows a system of abuse that lasted for decades," Thomas Pfister told The Associated Press.

There were some cases of sexual abuse at Ettal but most victims who came forward were physically abused and most cases took place before 1990, Pfister said in a telephone interview.

The lawyer declined to elaborate as his final report will be published next week.

Associated Press Writer Juergen Baetz in Berlin contributed to this report.

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