

Archbishop O'Brien calls papal preacher's comments 'reprehensible'

Archbishop Edwin F. O'Brien reacted strongly against comments made by Capuchin Father Raniero Cantalamessa that seemed to link criticism of the Catholic Church's handling of the clergy sexual abuse scandal with anti-Semitism.

Preaching the homily in the presence of Pope Benedict XVI at a Good Friday liturgy at St. Peter's Basilica in Rome April 2, Father Cantalamessa caused an uproar in the Jewish community when he read a portion of a letter from a 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."

Responding in an April 3 written statement, Archbishop O'Brien called Father Cantalamessa's comments "unfortunate and reprehensible."

"They pose harm to Catholic-Jewish relations in Baltimore and around the world and I personally denounce them," Archbishop O'Brien said. "Rightly upset and embarrassed as we are by the scandal we are enduring as Catholics, as frustrated as we are by the sometimes unfair coverage in certain elements of the press, nothing justifies this insensitive, harmful and regrettable comparison."

Speaking on behalf of the Catholic Church in Baltimore, Archbishop O'Brien offered apologies to the Jewish community, victims of clergy sexual abuse and anyone offended by "Father Cantalamessa's personal views."

In an April 4 interview with Italy's Corriere della Sera newspaper, Father Cantalamessa apologized to the Jewish community for his comments. He emphasized

that the pope did not authorize his comments, nor did the pope read the priest's text in advance.

Father Cantalamessa said he quoted from his Jewish friend "only because it seemed to me a witness of solidarity with the pope so harshly attacked in recent weeks."

"My intention therefore was a friendly one," he said, "not at all hostile."

The Archdiocese of Baltimore is known internationally for cultivating strong ties with the Jewish community. Cardinal William H. Keeler retired late last year as the longtime moderator of Jewish affairs for the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

Catholic News Service contributed to this article.