

Catholics called to be people of hope, says papal preacher

VATICAN CITY – Catholics are called to be people of hope and to demonstrate by their happiness the fact that they know God will provide, said the preacher of the papal household.

The preacher, Capuchin Father Raniero Cantalamessa, told Pope Benedict XVI and top Vatican officials Dec. 21 that the Catholic Church, especially in Italy and in the United States, must help its people recognize that they have real reasons for hope and valuable resources for facing the future.

Offering his weekly Advent meditation, Father Cantalamessa prescribed “an aromatherapy based on the oil of happiness, which is the Holy Spirit.”

“We need this therapy to heal the most pernicious illness of all: desperation, discouragement, the loss of faith in oneself, in life and even in the church,” he said.

The preacher told the pope and Vatican officials, “We human creatures need hope in order to live, just like we need oxygen to breathe.”

Hope is necessary not only for individuals, but also for societies and for their economic and cultural growth, he said.

“In Italy, hope has been stopped and with it confidence, energy, growth, including in the economy,” he said.

“Fear of the future has taken the place of hope. The declining birthrate is the clearest sign. Italy, more than any other country, needs to meditate on the pope’s encyclical” on Christian hope, he said. The encyclical “Spe Salvi” was released Nov. 30.

Father Cantalamessa’s remarks came as Italian politicians and church leaders, newspapers, television and radio programs continued debating the merits of a Dec. 13 New York Times story describing the mood of most Italians as being one of

“malaise” and citing a poll showing they are the least-happy people in Western Europe.

“The most precious service the Italian church can perform,” he said, is to help Italians find hope again, standing up to “defeatism, reminding Italians of the many and extraordinary spiritual and cultural reasons they have for trusting in their own resources.”

“But it is not only the Italian church that needs a jolt of hope; it is enough to think, for example, of Catholics in the United States,” he said, without commenting further.

“Hope is miraculous,” Father Cantalamessa said. “When it is reborn in a heart, everything is different, even if nothing has changed.”

The preacher said it is hope that leads to happiness and joy, not the other way around.

Christians, he said, are called “not to be people who hope to be happy, but people who are happy because they hope.”