

Church leaders step up criticism of Berlusconi

ROME – The head of the Italian bishops' conference condemned the "licentious behavior and improper relations" of Italy's political class, in what was seen as the strongest church criticism to date of Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi.

The speech by Cardinal Angelo Bagnasco of Genoa Sept. 26 did not specifically name Berlusconi but appeared to respond to recent sex scandal revelations involving the 74-year-old prime minister. He is accused of paying for sex with a 17-year-old dancer and is also facing trial for fraud.

"It is sad to see the deterioration of public morals and language," Cardinal Bagnasco said in an address to Italian bishops.

"It is especially mortifying to witness behavior that is not only contrary to public decorum but also intrinsically wretched and empty," he said.

He said such behavior was damaging to the entire country, and promoted a culture of easy pleasure instead of the spirit of sacrifice that is needed in tough economic times.

In mid-September, Italian newspapers reported excerpts from taped phone conversations, in which, among other things, Berlusconi boasted about having sex with eight women in one night. Opposition leaders said the taped calls suggested Berlusconi may have flown prostitutes to his villa on government planes.

Berlusconi has denied paying for sex but has frequently remarked on his attraction to young women.

Cardinal Bagnasco's remarks came four days after Pope Benedict XVI, in a telegram to Italian President Giorgio Napolitano, called for an "ever more intense ethical renewal" in Italy. Although the pope named no names, his comment was also seen as a criticism of Berlusconi.