

# Church must take sin seriously but stress God's mercy

VATICAN CITY - The Catholic Church must take sin seriously, but it must do so like Jesus did, by emphasizing God's mercy and trust in the sinner's ability to change, said the preacher of the papal household.

In criticizing the Pharisees, "Jesus does not deny that sin and sinners exist," said Capuchin Father Raniero Cantalamessa, offering a Lenten reflection March 30 to Pope Benedict XVI and top Vatican officials.

But Jesus "was more severe" toward those who "condemned the sinners than toward the sinners themselves," the preacher said.

From the evidence in the Bible, Father Cantalamessa said, "being merciful appears to be an essential aspect of being in 'the image and likeness of God.'"

Mercy is the form God's love takes in relation to sinners, he said.

"After we have experienced it, we must demonstrate it to our brothers and sisters, both on the level of the church community as well as on a personal level," the Capuchin said.

Jesus does not trivialize sin, "but finds a way not to alienate sinners, instead attracting them to himself. He does not see only what they are, but what they can become if divine mercy reaches the depths of their misery and desperation," he said.

Jesus "does not wait for them to come to him; often he is the one who goes out looking for them," the priest said.

“Jesus is firm and rigorous regarding principles, but he knows when a principle must give way to the superior principle, which is the mercy of God and the salvation of a person,” he said.

“How these criteria drawn from the actions of Christ can be applied concretely to the new problems today’s society poses will depend on patient research and, finally, on the discernment of the magisterium,” which is the church’s teaching authority, he said.

But every Christian must recognize that just as he or she has been forgiven by God forgiveness must be extended to others, Father Cantalamessa said.

“One cannot live in harmony, in one’s family or any other kind of community, without the practice of forgiveness and mercy,” he said.