

# Comfort zone: Pope's dialogues with priests flow freely

VATICAN CITY – The world sees the public side of Pope Benedict XVI generally at big ceremonial events in Rome or on foreign travels, when he's under the glare of the media.

But over the last three years, the “real Benedict” has emerged most fully in a series of semiprivate encounters with an audience he feels at home with – groups of priests.

In the northern Italian city of Bressanone in early August, the 81-year-old pope engaged in what has become a summer tradition: a question-and-answer session with the region's diocesan and religious priests.

The dialogue ran the gamut from environmental problems to papal primacy, and the pope took more than 10 minutes to answer each of the six questions. There weren't many softballs tossed his way.

One priest asked whether pastors should administer sacraments of Communion and confirmation to young people who aren't really aware of their significance.

The pope, in a moment of self-revelation that's become typical of these encounters, said he used to be more strict about administering the sacraments, but he's come to see that it's more important to be generous if it can encourage even a “glimmer” of faith.

The comment immediately prompted speculation that Pope Benedict might prove to be somewhat more lenient than expected on other sacramental issues, including the church's current policy of no Communion for Catholics who have divorced and remarried without an annulment.

Another priest, picking up on a strong papal theme of late, wondered whether the church over the centuries had dropped the ball when it comes to moral teaching on environmental protection.

The pope acknowledged some gaps in the church's attention to ecology, but said it was false to suggest that the Christian understanding of "subduing" the earth meant carelessly exploiting its resources.

"The brutal consumption of creation begins where there is no God, where material is considered only material for us," he said. "And the squandering of creation begins where we no longer recognize any power over us, but see only ourselves."

People today have the strong sensation that "the world is slipping away," he said, and it's a perfect opportunity for the church to publicly promote the Christian solution, which must include a more humble and moderate lifestyle.

What distinguishes these encounters is that the pope obviously feels he is speaking as a priest among priests, not an authority figure doing an obligatory drop-by.

During his first summer meeting with priests in 2005, he told his audience: "I also want to say that the pope is not an oracle, that he is infallible in only the rarest of situations, as we know."

That's a point the pope has made more than once as a preface to his responses; he's there to provide reflection and some guidance, not prefabricated answers to pastoral dilemmas.

In addition to the summer meetings in various parts of Italy, the pope holds the same kind of informal meetings each year with the several hundred priests of the Diocese of Rome. The first came shortly after his election, when he fielded 12 questions and comments.

The get-togethers allow the pope to hear what's on the minds of priests these days. For the most part, the focus has been on modern pastoral trials: the continuing drift away from the sacraments, the difficulties in educating young people beyond a certain age, the loss of church members to religious sects and the challenge of invigorating parish life.

One repeated issue in these dialogues has been the shortage of priests.

In Bressanone, for example, one questioner spoke of the lack of priests in connection

with priestly celibacy and the role of women. In other contexts, this might have been seen as raising a taboo subject. The pope took it in stride, although, as Italians would put it, he “dribbled” the question without really confronting the issue of women’s ordination or the relaxation of celibacy rules.

Jesuit Father Federico Lombardi, the Vatican spokesman, told Catholic News Service that the pope wants to keep the free-flowing atmosphere of these encounters. He’s made only one rule – that it take place away from the public and the media.

The content comes out when the Vatican publishes a transcript a few days later. That’s usually long enough to take the edge off the media’s appetite.

Of course, the pope has been generous with the media, too. On his recent flights to the United States and Australia, he gave reporters 20 minutes of question-and-answer time.

His clerical audiences, on the other hand, are often treated to nearly two hours of unrehearsed dialogue. With priests, the pope is clearly in his comfort zone.