

# **Easter at Vatican marked by continuing questions over handling abuse**

VATICAN CITY - Even as Pope Benedict XVI was focused on solemnly marking the death and resurrection of Jesus, Vatican officials tried to respond to criticism of the way Catholic leaders have handled the clerical sex abuse scandal, and they vigorously defended the pope.

As Pope Benedict arrived to celebrate Easter morning Mass with tens of thousands of people in St. Peter's Square, the dean of the College of Cardinals told him Catholics were rallying around him with love, admiration and prayers.

In an unusual departure from the Vatican's traditional Easter ceremony, Cardinal Angelo Sodano, the dean and former Vatican secretary of state, read his message in the square before Mass April 4.

Calling the pope "the untiring rock of the holy church of Christ," Cardinal Sodano thanked him for his strength, courage and great love.

The world's cardinals, bishops and "400,000 priests who generously serve the people of God" are with the pope, he said.

The world's Catholics support the pope as well, he said, and will not let their faith be shaken by the "current petty gossip" surrounding the church, nor by the "ordeals that occasionally strike the church community."

During his Holy Week and Easter celebrations, Pope Benedict did not speak publicly about the sex abuse crisis or about criticism of the way he or anyone else handled accusations of abuse.

But the preacher of the papal household, Capuchin Father Raniero Cantalamessa, did mention abuse during the sermon he gave during the pope's Good Friday liturgy April 2 in St. Peter's Basilica.

In a homily focused on how Jesus broke the cycle of violence and victimizing others by taking on the world's sins and offering himself as a victim, Father Cantalamessa said he wanted to focus on all types of violence and not specifically "violence against children, concerning which even some members of clergy are wretchedly guilty."

In a passage of his homily remarking on the fact that the Christian Holy Week and the Jewish Passover coincided this year, he said the Jews "know from experience what it means to be victims of collective violence" and recognize when other groups are being attacked simply because of who they are.

He then read a portion of a letter he said he received from a Jewish friend, who wrote that he was following "with disgust" attacks against the church and the pope; the use of stereotypes; and using the wrongdoings of certain individuals as an excuse to paint a whole group with collective guilt, saying the current situation reminded the Jewish author of "the most shameful aspects of anti-Semitism."

Following harsh criticism for what some saw as comparing anti-Semitism and violence against the Jews to criticism of the church's handling of sex abuse, Father Cantalamessa told an Italian newspaper April 4 he was sincerely sorry if he offended any members of the Jewish community or any victims of sexual abuse. He added he realized that for centuries, Christian mobs would commemorate Jesus' death on Good Friday and then go out and attack Jews.

He said no one at the Vatican, not even the pope, had read his homily before he gave it, and he said he read the passage from his Jewish friend's letter simply because "it seemed to be a testimony of solidarity with the pope, who has been harshly attacked in these days."

"In fact, I do not think there is any way to compare anti-Semitism to the attacks on the church in these days and I don't believe my Jewish friend intended to do so either," he said.

The only similarity is "the use of stereotypes and the facile passage from individual to collective guilt," Father Cantalamessa told the newspaper, *Corriere della Sera*.

Jesuit Father Federico Lombardi, the Vatican spokesman, said April 3 said the

Vatican does not think “the attacks on the pope for the scandal of pedophilia” are like anti-Semitism.

Also April 3, the spokesman responded to news reports that as head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, the future Pope Benedict let an Arizona case of clerical sexual abuse “languish at the Vatican for years despite repeated pleas from the bishop for the man to be removed from the priesthood.”

In the Diocese of Tucson’s case against the former Father Michael Teta, Father Lombardi said, the documentation shows “with clarity and certainty” that the doctrinal congregation actively worked in the 1990s to ensure the diocesan process “could dutifully reach its conclusion.”

However, Teta appealed the diocesan tribunal’s sentence at a time when the congregation under the future pope was revising and strengthening the church’s norms for dealing with abusive priests.

Once the new norms were in place in 2001, he said, Teta’s case was one of the first to be dealt with, but it did take time “because the documentation produced was particularly large.”

Teta’s dismissal from the priesthood was announced in 2004, but, Father Lombardi said, “one must not forget that even when appeals are pending and the sentence is suspended, the cautionary measures imposed by the bishop on the accused remain in place,” so Teta’s 1990 suspension from all ministry continued until his laicization.