

Papal preacher won't lecture in Medjugorje after bishop nixes plan

MOSTAR, Bosnia-Herzegovina – The preacher of the papal household has withdrawn from plans to deliver a series of lectures in Medjugorje, Bosnia-Herzegovina, after the local bishop denied him permission to speak there.

Capuchin Father Raniero Cantalamessa, who has been the pope's preacher since 1980, was to be the keynote speaker at the 12th International Seminar for Priests July 3-5 in Medjugorje, the site of thousands of alleged appearances of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

He was expected to have given three lectures at the event, titled "With Mary, in Anticipation of the Holy Spirit," but he pulled out after Bishop Ratko Peric of Mostar-Duvno, whose diocese covers Medjugorje, informed him that he did not have his permission to attend the event.

"My principle is not to preach, especially not to the clergy, without the permission of the local bishop," Father Cantalamessa wrote in a letter to Bishop Peric June 13. Excerpts of the letter were released by the Diocese of Mostar-Duvno June 18.

Father Cantalamessa is a well-known figure in the Vatican, and every Friday during Lent and Advent he preaches meditations in the presence of the pope, cardinals, bishops and the superiors of religious orders.

Father Cantalamessa's decision to withdraw from the seminar was announced publicly in English and Croatian by Monsignor Srecko Majic, Mostar vicar general.

"This diocesan chancery never received any written request for permission, as is the norm, from either of the parties involved with regard to the spiritual retreat," he said.

"The norms of the Code of Canon Law have not been respected in this case," he added.

Father Cantalamessa could not immediately be reached for comment because he was traveling.

Monsignor Majic explained that the event had been advertised on the Internet for months but the diocese had never been approached for permission to hold it in accordance with norms established by an August 2001 letter from the bishop.

The monsignor said organizers were also billing Father Jozo Zovko, who throughout the 1980s acted as “spiritual adviser” to the six alleged visionaries, as a confessor to priests even though his priestly faculties were revoked by Bishop Peric in 2004.

Monsignor Majic said the diocese had decided to publicize Father Cantalamessa’s decision partly to help to clear up confusion over the status of Medjugorje, which, according to an April statement by Bishop Peric, is “neither a diocesan nor national or international shrine.”

Monsignor Majic said the diocese sought to dispel “misinterpretations and deceptions which can be seen in the comments on the Web sites that regard Medjugorje as a place of supposed apparitions for which the position of the church remains ‘that it cannot be affirmed that these events concern supernatural apparitions and revelations.’”

Bishop Peric vehemently opposes claims that Mary has appeared in the village almost 40,000 times in the last 26 years and last year complained personally to Pope Benedict XVI that priests from overseas were ignoring the wishes of the local bishops not to go on pilgrimages there.

Last year Bishop Peric appealed to the visionaries to stop claiming that Mary has been visiting them for decades.

Preaching in St James’s Church, the place where most of the apparitions are said to have taken place, he said the church “has not accepted, either as supernatural or as Marian, any of the apparitions.”

“As the local bishop, I maintain that regarding the events of Medjugorje, on the basis of the investigations and experience gained thus far throughout these last 25 years, the church has not confirmed a single apparition as authentically being the

Madonna," he said.

In July Cardinal Vinko Puljic of Sarajevo announced that the Bosnian bishops would form a commission to review the alleged apparitions and the pastoral provisions for the many thousands of pilgrims who visit the town each year.