

Pope's asides might be changed in official texts

VATICAN CITY - Rarely is a general audience talk interrupted by spontaneous applause, and Pope Benedict XVI seemed as surprised as anyone when the clapping began in the Vatican's audience hall.

The pope had been talking about the church's early times, and he set aside his text to drive home a point: The apostles and first disciples weren't perfect, but had their own arguments and controversies.

"This appears very consoling to me, because we see that the saints did not drop as saints from heaven. They were men like us with problems and even with sins," he said Jan. 31.

That's when the applause erupted among the 6,000 people in attendance. The pope paused, looked up and smiled awkwardly, then continued to ad lib about how holiness doesn't mean never making a mistake.

The moment marked a milestone for Pope Benedict as a communicator and demonstrated two important facts: First, the scholarly pontiff is focusing on uncomplicated lessons about the church and the faith. Second, when he talks, people listen.

The simple idea that saints were also sinners resonated with his audience, and journalists were among those eagerly awaiting the Vatican's official text of the pope's remarks. But a funny thing happened on the way to the printing presses.

When the Vatican press office released the text two hours later, gone was the line about the sins of saints. Instead, the official version had the pope saying that the early saints "were men like us with problems that were complicated."

The pope spoke in Italian, and "con peccati" ("with sins") sounds like "complicati" ("complicated"). But a close listening to a tape confirmed that the pope had indeed been speaking about sins. The Vatican spoiled his applause line.

What happened? The discrepancy was said to be a simple transcription error. Two days later, however, it had still not been corrected – which meant that many media reported the mistaken version.

It's not always easy to catch every word the pope delivers off-the-cuff. But on some occasions, the pope's words have been deliberately tweaked by his own aides. The process was explained recently by Jesuit Father Federico Lombardi, director of the Vatican press office, in a meeting with a group of news agency reporters.

When Pope Benedict extemporizes, the Vatican press office scrambles to transcribe the talk and put it in the hands of the media. But before that happens, the transcript is sent to an office of the Secretariat of State, where it undergoes a “final polishing in Italian,” Father Lombardi said.

The reasoning is that the German pope, although fluent in Italian, might use an awkward or imprecise phrase that could be rendered more elegantly.

Reporters have noticed these changes from the beginning of Pope Benedict's pontificate. Most are minor stylistic modifications. But some are more substantial and seem to suggest the presence of an overly cautious editor.

For example, when the pope learned in 2005 that Brother Roger Schutz of the Taizé community had just been stabbed to death, he went out and told a general audience about what he called the “terrifying news.” That was changed to “dramatic news” in the official version, which toned down his spoken remarks and drained it of the emotion the pope had expressed so well.

Father Lombardi, who also directs Vatican Radio and knows the journalistic profession well, said there's no question that journalists are authorized to report what the pope actually says, even if it differs from the official text.

That poses a problem of consistency, however, even inside the Vatican. After the pope's recent audience talk, the Vatican newspaper, *L'Osservatore Romano*, reported the “saints had complicated problems” version, while Vatican Radio went with “the saints had sins.”

The problems stem partly from Pope Benedict's less formal style at the Wednesday

general audiences.

In Pope John Paul II's later years, general audiences were primarily a mass photo op instead of a catechizing moment for those who attend. Most people came to see the pope, not hear a speech. That explains why reporters seeking reaction to papal remarks at the audience were usually met with blank stares.

But that is changing under Pope Benedict. For one thing, his diction is clear – in contrast to that of his ailing predecessor.

Another big reason people pay attention is that the pope often puts down his printed text and drives his ideas home in simple asides. He seems to have a keen sense of when he's engaging people and when he risks going over their head.

The pope has a purpose in all this, which is reflected in the themes of these weekly talks. For months now, he's been speaking about the apostles and the evangelizers of the early church, trying to make them more real and less distant to modern Christians.

The general audiences used to be a place where reporters looked for commentary on current events. They are finding less of that these days, and more on Scripture, the church and salvation. The pope's goal is to bring people back to the roots of their faith, aware that many Christians in the audience hall and beyond are hearing these New Testament stories for the first time.