

Pope's straight talk to Rome officials causes political storm

VATICAN CITY – In an apparent rebuke to Rome government officials, Pope Benedict XVI criticized what he called “very serious degradation” in areas of the city and the surrounding region.

The pope urged the officials to resolve a series of emergencies in education, housing, poverty, unemployment and public safety.

He also warned that there should be greater support for the traditional family “founded on marriage” – an implicit criticism of recent efforts in Rome to grant legal recognition and benefits to cohabiting couples.

The talk Jan. 10 ignited a storm of political controversy, and the next day the Vatican issued a statement expressing amazement at the reaction. It said it was not the pope's intention to ignore the “appreciable commitment” of the city and the region to deal with the problems.

The pope made his remarks in a meeting with administrators led by Rome Mayor Walter Veltroni; the president of the province of Rome, Enrico Gasbarra; and the president of the region of Lazio, Pietro Marrazzo. All three are members of center-left political parties.

The annual papal audience is usually a pleasant exchange of greetings and perspectives, but this time the pope took dead-center aim at a number of social ills.

One big problem, he said, was increasing poverty, something the church and its agencies work tirelessly to alleviate.

“The increase in the cost of living, especially in housing prices, the persistent pockets of unemployment, and the inadequate salaries and pensions are making life truly difficult for many individuals and families,” he said.

Referring to the recent murder of a Roman woman, allegedly by a Romanian

immigrant, the pope said city officials urgently need to find a way to increase security. But they also need to provide to immigrants the basic opportunities for an “honest and dignified life,” he said.

He said the Lazio region has serious problems meeting health care needs. Often, he said, Catholic hospitals fill the gap – and therefore should not be penalized when it comes to allocating resources.

On marriage, the pope was particularly blunt, saying the family founded on marriage between a man and a woman was the basic building block of society.

“Unfortunately, we see every day how insistent and threatening are the attacks and misinterpretations of this fundamental human and social reality,” he said.

“Therefore it is more than ever necessary that the public administrations do not provide backing for such negative tendencies, but on the contrary offer families convinced and concrete support,” he said.

The pope found little to praise, although he thanked the Lazio region for helping to finance the construction of church-run social centers and parish complexes.

Italian media unanimously interpreted the pope’s speech as a severe reprimand, and opposition political parties lost no time in adding to the criticism.

“The pope to Veltroni: Rome is in ruins” was one newspaper headline. Another respected newspaper called it “an unexpected attack” on the center-left politicians.

The talk was seen by many as aimed particularly at Veltroni, secretary of the Democratic Party. One newspaper said the Vatican clearly sees Veltroni as Italy’s “new Zapatero,” a reference to Spanish Prime Minister Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero, who has sparred with the church over a number of issues.

The Vatican statement Jan. 11 criticized what it called the “political exploitation” of the pope’s words.

The same day, the pope met privately with Cardinal Camillo Ruini, papal vicar for Rome, who governs the diocese in the name of the pope. No information about their

meeting was made public.

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