

# Writer awed over responsibility

VATICAN CITY - It's not every day a person gets a call from the Vatican, and most people would be bowled over when it happens.

The late Mario Luzi, who as a prolific Italian poet shouldn't have been at a loss for words, was "flabbergasted" when the Vatican called him up saying Pope John Paul II wanted him to pen the meditations for the pope's 1999 Good Friday Way of the Cross, an event watched each year by millions of people around the world.

That same sense of astonishment washed over journalists in 2002 when the Vatican asked a select group to draw up that year's meditations.

John Thavis, Catholic News Service's Rome bureau chief, recalled that he was both "surprised and a little intimidated" by the once-in-a-lifetime assignment.

Monsignor Gianfranco Ravasi was shocked this year when the Vatican's secretary of state, Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, telephoned him to say that Pope Benedict XVI wanted him to compose the Good Friday reflections.

The 2007 stations are drawn directly from the Gospel of Luke, whereas last year's followed the traditional Catholic set that includes events not in the Bible such as St. Veronica wiping Jesus' face.

The monsignor told the Catholic newspaper *Avvenire* he never thought such a papal invitation would come his way and that "the same sense of astonishment" felt by his poet friend, Luzi, "would hit me next."

But what made Monsignor Ravasi reel, he said, was not so much the fact that the Way of the Cross papal liturgy is watched by so many people.

Instead, it was the fear that his meditations could never be up to snuff in the wake of the pope's own reflections which he wrote as Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger in 2005.

Pope Benedict's comments on Christ's passion and the way people today still contribute to his suffering were "of great power that had left a strong impression on the huge audience," Monsignor Ravasi told *Avvenire* April 1.

But the pope must have felt this biblical scholar would measure up.

Prefect of the Milan Archdiocese's Ambrosian Library and a member of the Pontifical Biblical Commission, Monsignor Ravasi is a noted expert on Scripture and recognized for his ability to make Christianity understandable in today's world.

The task for the Way of the Cross commentary and prayers is to help participants walk in Christ's footsteps, so in presenting the stations Monsignor Ravasi looked at modern sins and sufferings and how today's Christians should respond.

In his meditation for the fifth station - "Jesus is judged by Pilate" - Monsignor Ravasi wrote about "the savage power of the masses" and how they can be manipulated by "occult forces hatching plots in the shadows."

In that station, Pilate is eventually worn down by the enormous pressure of public opinion although he found Jesus innocent. Monsignor Ravasi wrote that the "indifference, lack of concern, personal expediency" shown by Pilate appear "common enough in our own times" in which "we are ready to trample on truth and justice" to avoid trouble or to get ahead.

In his meditation for the sixth station - "Jesus is scourged and crowned with thorns" - Monsignor Ravasi denounced the "thousand sadistic and perverse ways" people are tortured, abused or mocked "in the darkness of countless prison cells."

God will condemn all the world's tyrants and torturers, and welcome "not only their victims, but all those who visited prisoners, healed the wounded and suffering, and assisted the hungry, the thirsty and the persecuted," he wrote.

He also highlighted the plight of the aged, infirm, lonely and dying, and how despite God's utter silence Christ does not succumb "to the temptation of despair and surrender, but to a profession of confident trust in the Father and his mysterious plan."

All those "who are desolate and unhappy, ignored by the busy and distracted crowd which hurries by" can be seen in the Christ bent beneath the enormous weight of his cross in the seventh station, Monsignor Ravasi wrote.

Though Christ is pummeled with hostility or indifference, there are those who choose to follow him “and bear the abuse he endured,” he wrote in the reflections.

Monsignor Ravasi also reflected on women “who have been abused and raped, ostracized and submitted to shameful tribal practices, anxious women left to raise their children alone, Jewish and Palestinian mothers, and those from all countries at war, widows and the elderly forgotten by their children.”

He said Jesus’ encounter with the women of Jerusalem at the ninth station brings to mind the many women who in “an arid and pitiless world” still “bear witness to the gift of tenderness and compassion.”

Jesus on the cross makes a final gesture of love at the 11th station, when he promises his kingdom to the good thief. Here Christians are reminded not only of God’s infinite gift of forgiveness, but also of the true goal in “our toilsome journey through history,” the biblicist wrote.

That goal is paradise, he said, the “fullness of life, it is the intimacy of God’s embrace. It is the final gift which Christ makes to us.”