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Hierarchy rallies around beleaguered pope

Francis X. Rocca Religion News Service | Mar. 29, 2010

VATICAN CITY -- Prominent bishops in Europe and North America are rallying behind a beleaguered Pope Benedict XVI, trying to fend off charges that Benedict mishandled cases of clerical sex abuse before becoming pope.

"Our earthly shepherd [is] now suffering some of the same unjust accusations, shouts of the mob, and scourging at the pillar, as did Jesus," said New York's Archbishop Timothy M. Dolan, at the conclusion of a Palm Sunday,March 28, Mass in St. Patrick's Cathedral.

News reports have led to charges that Benedict, then known as Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, approved the 1980 reassignment to pastoral work of an accused pedophile in Munich, Germany, who was later convicted of sexually abusing other children.

Other reports have provoked protests over Ratzinger's apparent decision, in 1998, to suspend disciplinary procedures against a Milwaukee priest who was accused of molesting as many as 200 deaf boys between 1950 and 1974.

Denouncing the "inaccuracy, bias, and hyperbole of such aspersions," Dolan praised Benedict -- who supervised the Catholic church's investigation of clerical sex abuse cases from 2001 to 2005 -- as the "man who, perhaps more than anyone else has been the leader in purification, reform, and renewal that the church so needs."

Dolan's words echoed those of Germany's Cardinal Walter Kasper, a former opponent of Ratzinger's in theological debates and now the Vatican's top ecumenical official.

"[Benedict] was the first who already as a cardinal felt the need for new, more severe rules" against clerical sex abuse, Kasper told the Italian daily Corriere Della Sera in an interview published Saturday, March 27.

"That some newspapers now exploit terrible cases in order to attack [the pope] frontally is something that transgresses every limit of justice and loyalty," Kasper said.

A similar defense came from the leader of Catholics in England and Wales, Archbishop Vincent Nichols, as Benedict readies for a much-anticipated pilgrimage to England and Scotland this September.

Writing in the Times of London on Friday, March 26, Nichols enumerated some of the anti-abuse measures that Benedict enacted during his tenure as a Vatican cardinal, including the "inclusion in canon law of internet offenses against children, ... the case-by-case waiving of the statute of limitations and the establishment of a fast-track dismissal from the clerical state for offenders."

"[Benedict] is not an idle observer," Nichols concluded. "His actions speak as well as his words."

On the same day, Canada's Cardinal Marc Ouellet condemned what he called efforts by "several media" to "mix

up Pope Benedict XVI with the cover-up of sexual abuse cases."

"The Holy Father has always shown the same spirit of zero tolerance on [sex abuse], during each one of his responsibilities leading to his pontificate," Ouellet wrote in a statement posted on the Web site of the Archdiocese of Quebec City. "To claim otherwise is to be profoundly mistaken about this man of deep compassion and justice."

Yet the hierarchy did not sing entirely in harmony, as one prominent member suggested the church's current crisis could lead to a married Catholic priesthood -- a move Benedict has rejected more than once.

"What can the church do in the future to avoid violence and sex abuse?" wrote Cardinal Carlo Martini, the retired archbishop of Milan, on Saturday in the Austrian Newspaper Die Presse.

"It is necessary to rethink the question of mandatory celibacy as a way of life for priests," wrote Martini, who was widely considered the progressive candidate for pope in the 2005 conclave that elected Benedict.

"Some burden of tradition must be cast away," wrote Martini, "so that the message of the Bible of the dignity of every human person might shine out."

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