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Pope's defenders push back

John L. Allen Jr. | May. 16, 2010 NCR Today

Rome -- Both in the media and on the street, defenders of Pope Benedict XVI pushed back this weekend ? in effect, insisting that the pope still enjoys popular support, and that media focus on the Catholic church vis-à-vis the sexual abuse of minors, as opposed to the broader culture, amounts to ?moral panic.?

On Saturday, the prestigious Jesuit-edited journal *Civilità Cattolica* published the second installment of a two-part series on pedophilia. Meanwhile on Sunday, an umbrella group of lay Catholic movements in Italy organized a massive rally in St. Peter?s Square to show support for Benedict XVI, which drew more than 150,000 people.

Though neither development was sponsored by the Vatican, both were obviously welcomed by senior advisors to Benedict XVI.

tThe *Civilità Cattolica* article was written by Italian Jesuit Fr. Giovanni Cucci and German Jesuit Fr. Hans Zollner, both of whom teach in the Institute of Psychiatry at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome.

tIn summary, their piece makes the following points:

- Psychological literature on pedophilia is confused on both the definition and the causes of the disorder, but there?s general agreement on its gravity. Pedophiles ?do not recognize they have a problem, are highly resistant to therapy, [and] they lack a perception of the gravity of the acts they commit.?
- Priestly celibacy does not cause pedophilia. Citing data both for the United States and elsewhere, Cucci and Zollner assert that the instance of pedophilia is at least as high in sporting associations, social institutions that serve young persons, and Protestant churches, and in each case those acts of abuse are committed by non-celibate persons. Two-thirds of the sexual abuse of children occurs in the family, committed by people who aren?t celibate.
- Media focus on sex abuse in the Catholic church, the authors assert, is an example of ?moral panic,? the defining elements of which are: 1) presenting old information as if it?s new, and 2) obscuring the real statistical dimension of the problem. Cucci and Zollner cite Philip Jenkins of Pennsylvania State University, who has written extensively on the sex abuse crisis in the United States.
- Social attitudes in recent decades, the authors assert, have oscillated between criminalization and liberalization of sexual contact with minors. The cite the German Green Party, which in 1985 proposed the decriminalization of sexual relationships with minors ? noting the irony that some German Greens have been among the fiercest critics of the Catholic church in Germany and of Pope Benedict XVI on the church?s handling of the sex abuse crisis.
- Criticism of Pope Benedict XVI for allegedly being too slow to remove predator priests, the authors assert, overlooks the fact that guilt has to be definitively established before penalties can be imposed. The media, the authors assert, ?don?t hesitate to put accused persons on the front page, as if they were automatically guilty, and then ?forget? to report the news if they?re found innocent.?

?There are, unfortunately, many sad aspects to this affair, which are certainly not very edifying,? Cucci and Zollner write, referring to media coverage of the pope?s record and the sexual abuse crisis. ?One hopes the appropriate lessons are drawn.?

Civilità Cattolica is reviewed by the Vatican?s Secretariat of State prior to publication, and is generally believed to reflect the thinking of senior Vatican officials.

Sunday?s rally, meanwhile, brought tens of thousands of Catholic laity from throughout Italy to St. Peter?s Square for a rally sponsored by the *Consulta nazionale della aggregazioni laicali*, an umbrella group for 67 lay organizations.

Special trains and buses were organized across the country to bring Catholics to St. Peter?s Square, despite chilly and rainy weather on Sunday. The event was carried live on Catholic television and Internet sites in Italy.

t?We want Benedict XVI to hear our affection, after months of repeated attacks against him and the whole church,? said Gabriele Brunini, president of the National Confederation of Mercy, a Catholic charitable group in Italy.

t?We can?t forget the people who?ve been victims of abuse,? Brunini said, ?but to utilize the scandal of pedophile priests to strike at the pope and the church, trying to reduce them to silence, is something else entirely.?

tClaudia Nodari, president of the St. Vincent de Paul Society in Italy, struck a similar note.

t?We?re with the pope,? she said, ?against the effort to cancel out all the good the church and its ministers have done, and are doing, for the spiritual and material welfare of people all over the world.?

tGuido Boldrin, a member of the ?Communion and Liberation? movement who made the trip from Milan to Rome to take part in the rally along with his wife and four daughters, said he wanted to protest the ?cynical and unjust? campaign against Benedict XVI on the part of the ?national and international media.?

tThe gathering in St. Peter?s Square began with a liturgy of the Word led by Cardinal Angelo Bagnasco, president of the Italian bishops? conference, and culminated with Benedict XVI?s regular Sunday prayer of the Regina Coeli.

Seventy members of the Italian parliament turned out, representing all the major political parties in Italy.

Continuing the tone he set during his trip to Portugal, Benedict XVI insisted that the problem facing the church comes from internal sin rather than external attacks.

?The true enemy to fear and to combat is sin, spiritual evil, which at times, unfortunately, infects even members of the church,? the pope said.

tThe rally in Rome built on Benedict?s four-day trip to Portugal last week, when he drew large crowds throughout the country ? including an estimated half-million for a May 13 Mass in Fatima, and some 200,000 for his concluding Mass on May 14 in Porto (which is located in the north of Portugal, where levels of religious faith and practice remain comparatively high.)

tBoth Vatican officials and bishops in other parts of the world pointed to the turnout in Portugal as evidence that the pope?s base is still with him.

?I think it?s very encouraging that at this time of crisis in the church, that the Holy Father would experience the support he has here,? said Cardinal Sean O?Malley of Boston, who was in Portugal participating in the papal visit.

O?Malley spoke in a May 13 interview with *NCR* after the papal Mass in Fatima.

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