NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

In Italian sex scandal, Vatican caught in a bind

Francis X. Rocca Religion News Service | Feb. 21, 2011

VATICAN CITY -- No major Western European leader in recent years has been a more stalwart ally of the Roman Catholic Church than Italy?s Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi.

Berlusconi?s stands against euthanasia, living wills, in-vitro fertilization and domestic partnerships have put his country in line with Catholic teaching, and out of sync with all other major countries in the region, including traditionally Catholic Spain. His government has also granted large financial subsidies to Catholic schools, and expanded tax breaks for church-owned businesses.

Yet in Berlusconi?s increasingly public personal life, the billionaire businessman-turned-politician is not exactly a model of Catholic values.

After months of ever more graphic reports of wild parties and sex with young women, including several alleged prostitutes, a judge on Tuesday (Feb. 15) ruled that Berlusconi must face trial on April 6 on charges of paying for sex with a minor and obstruction of justice.

The tension between Berlusconi?s political platform and his personal behavior has put church leaders in an exquisitely awkward position, to which they have reacted with conspicuous understatement.

Last month, in what was widely taken as an allusion to the Berlusconi crisis, Pope Benedict XVI told a gathering of Rome police that public officials must ?rediscover their spiritual and moral roots.? Vatican Secretary of State Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, the church?s No. 2 official, said the Vatican was watching the Italian situation with ?great attention and concern,? and he called on leaders to show a ?more robust morality.?

Slightly stronger words came a few days later from Cardinal Angelo Bagnasco, head of the Italian bishops? conference, who said public officials must show ?sobriety, personal discipline ... and honor.?

Yet even Bagnasco did not refer to the prime minister by name, and he tempered his criticism by questioning the motives of investigating prosecutors.

Significantly, the most eloquent statement by church leaders so far may have been a moment of silence. At a ceremony on Friday commemorating treaties between Italy and the Vatican, Bertone and Berlusconi were both present but reportedly did not speak. By contrast, at a similar ceremony four years earlier, the Vatican?s No. 2 spent a half-hour in private conversation with then-Prime Minister Romano Prodi, with whom he was publicly at odds over Prodi?s support for domestic partnerships.

Catholic bishops have several strong reasons to refrain from openly criticizing Berlusconi now. The most obvious is that the church needs the cooperation of his center-right government to pursue its legislative agenda.

Church leaders here have long refrained from commenting on political leaders? private lives, as opposed to their policies, said Massimo Franco, a writer for Italy?s leading newspaper Corriere della Sera.

That public-private distinction also holds in the United States, said Russell Shaw, a former chief spokesman for the U.S. bishops? conference. During the 1998 sex scandal involving President Bill Clinton and the former White House intern Monica Lewinsky, the American bishops never issued a group statement, and most bishops refrained from comment, Shaw said.

Another factor inhibiting Italian church leaders in the Berlusconi matter, Franco said, may be last year?s controversies over clergy sex abuse in several European and Latin American countries, which undermined the church?s moral authority in the eyes of many critics.

Last month, Berlusconi?s outspoken coalition-partner Umberto Bossi, leader of the Northern League party, made a not-so-subtle allusion to abusive priests when he suggested that prosecutors who had been investigating the prime minister should also pay a visit to the Vatican.

Still, the pressure on church leaders to break with the prime minister may grow too strong to resist. An anti-Berlusconi demonstration by hundreds of thousands of Italian women on Feb. 13 won the endorsement of the editor of the Italian bishops? official newspaper; one of the most prominent speakers at the rally in Rome was a 70-year-old nun who is also an activist against sex trafficking.

Practicing Catholics are a core element of Berlusconi?s political base, but their support is ?eroding,? said Roberto D?Alimonte, a political scientist at Rome?s LUISS Guido Carli University.

?It?s easier for church leaders to turn a blind eye, but there?s a problem at the parish level,? D?Alimonte said. ?It?s not easy for a pastor to explain why the church supports a man whose behavior is so in contrast with family values.?

Source URL (retrieved on *12/02/2015 - 02:13*): http://ncronline.org/news/global/italian-sex-scandal-vatican-caught-bind