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

Ravasi: Sometimes God listens more to blasphemy

John L. Allen Jr. | Feb. 18, 2013 NCR Today
Benedict Resigns
Rome

So far, it doesn't seem that Cardinal Gianfranco Ravasi is allowing the pressure of delivering the Vatican's Lenten retreat just ahead of a looming conclave to induce him to pull his spiritual punches.

On Sunday, before an audience including Pope Benedict XVI and several Vatican cardinals likely to be king-makers and even candidates in the papal election next month, Ravasi suggested that sometimes blasphemy is heard with greater attention by God than pre-fabricated prayers offered during the Sunday liturgy.

During his 38-minute opening talk in the Vatican's Redemptoris Mater chapel, Ravasi said he had received a letter just the day before from friends who have a child diagnosed with a serious form of muscular dystrophy, who's not expected to live to 1 year old.

"When you hold this creature in your hands, so dramatically marked [by suffering], even a blasphemous cry, as we might judge it on the outside, may be heard by God with more attention than so many prayers offered up on Sunday morning during the cult," Ravasi said.

"God knows how to read the pleas and the prayers of these persons in their depth," said the 70-year-old Italian cardinal, a biblical scholar and president of the Pontifical Council for Culture.

After a brief tribute to Pope Benedict XVI, comparing his role after retirement to that of Moses praying on a mountain while the Israelites do battle, Ravasi structured his remarks in terms of what he called four key verbs for understanding the importance of prayer: "to breathe," "to think," "to struggle" and "to love."

The Vatican is not releasing full texts of Ravasi's talks, but they are available as podcasts in Italian on the Vatican Radio website.

In many ways, last night's meditation was a vintage performance for Ravasi, an intellectual virtuoso who drops literary allusions the way other people pause for breath while giving speeches.

In the course of just 38 minutes, Ravasi not only repeatedly cited Scripture -- especially the Psalms, which is the focus of his meditations this week -- but such diverse sources as Etty Hillseum, a Jewish victim of Auschwitz; Soren Kierkegaard; the late Cardinal Yves Congar; the 18th century German Romantic poet Novalis; Martin Heidegger; a hadith from Muhammad; an eighth-century female Suffi mystic named Rabia Basri; Aristotle; and Blaise Pascal.

If the cardinals who will gather in the Sistine Chapel next month want someone who can bring something like the same intellectual chops of Benedict XVI to the papacy, Ravasi's offering last night might be food for thought.

In terms of the verb "to breathe," Ravasi suggested believers need to look on prayer the same way they do breath, as a physical necessity rather than an optional free-time activity.

He quoted Kierkegaard: "Why do you have to pray? Why do you have to breathe? Because otherwise I'd die."

Concerning the verb "to think," Ravasi quoted Thomas Aquinas to the effect that prayer is "an act of reason," another form of the human search for good that also draws on the person's intellect.

Prayer is also, he said, a way to "struggle" with God, using the Old Testament example of Job, as well as St. John of the Cross and St. Teresa of Avila.

It was in this context that Ravasi mentioned the letter from his friends about their dying child.

Finally, Ravasi said prayer must also be an act of love, quoting Pascal to the effect that for a person in love, sometimes "silences are much more eloquent than words."

Throughout this week, Ravasi is set to deliver three talks every day for the Lenten retreat, which concludes Saturday morning. That afternoon, Benedict XVI is scheduled to meet Italian President Giorgio Napolitano, his last formal farewell to a political leader.

Benedict will deliver his final Sunday Angelus address on Feb. 24, with his final general audience Feb. 27.

After a farewell session with the College of Cardinals on the morning of Feb. 28, Benedict is expected to take off by helicopter for the pope's summer residence at Castel Gandolfo around 6 p.m. Rome time, arriving before his papacy formally ends at 8 p.m.

Source URL (retrieved on *05/06/2015 - 03:51*): http://ncronline.org/blogs/ncr-today/ravasi-sometimes-god-listens-more-blasphemy