

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

August 10, 2007 at 8:40am

Sex scandal in Italy; Appreciating Cardinal Lustiger; Latin Mass update; and a Polish radio priest

by John L. Allen Jr.

All Things Catholic

Controversy continued to mount this week surrounding sex abuse charges against one of the highest-profile figures in Italian Catholicism, Fr. Pierino Gelmini, the 82-year-old founder of a movement called *Comunità Incontro* (Encounter Community), which works with young alcohol and drug addicts. Founded in 1963, the community has 164 centers in Italy and 74 abroad, including Thailand, Bolivia and Brazil, which have served more than 300,000 youth.

Over the years, Gelmini has been a staple of Italian television (with his own show on Italian state TV called "Rock Caffè") and a darling of the political right. A leading Italian newspaper termed Gelmini "one of the three most famous priests in Italy."

Though details are emerging only now, Gelmini apparently was put under investigation six months ago by prosecutors in the Italian city of Terni, the capital of the Umbria region north of Rome, after two former residents kicked out of a center run by the Encounter Community told police they had been abused by Gelmini. Italian media reports suggest that as many as seven other ex-residents have come forward with similar charges.

Gelmini has strenuously denied the accusations, telling Italian media that the ex-residents tried to extort money from him and went to the police only after he refused to pay.

"I am suffering, but at the same time I'm very calm, because 44 years of work cannot be wiped out by these insinuations," Gelmini said. "It is a cross I must bear."

At this stage, it's impossible to say whether the charges have merit or how they might be resolved. In the meantime, one interesting aspect of the story from an American point of view is how it illustrates the lingering cultural gap between the United States and Italy on the question of sexual abuse by priests.

In the States, both the press and the general public have come to suspect that where there's smoke, there's often fire, so charges of this sort are almost always taken seriously. Italians, on the other hand, long accustomed to political manipulation of the justice system and with a seemingly limitless appetite for conspiracy theories, often presume that charges of criminal misconduct (whether against priests or anyone else) are an extension of politics by other means. In the States, the church by and large has abandoned the strategy of "the best defense is a good offense." Not so in Italy, where Gelimini has come out swinging.

Aside from asserting that his accusers attempted to shake him down, Gelmini over the last week has also made the following statements in interviews with Italian newspapers and broadcast outlets:

- Gelmini initially blamed a "Jewish-radical chic" for launching a campaign of defamation against the Catholic Church. Later he apologized for the reference to Jews, adding that he had intended to say "Masons."
- On the situation in the United States, Gelmini said: "Think about what's happened in America, about the political manipulation on the subject of pedophile priests. The church has made a mistake by paying damages ? It seems to me that what's happening is a global strategy that, beginning with the American church, intends to weaken the entire church. There aren't just pedophiles in the priesthood! Pedophiles are everywhere in society, also among Protestant pastors."
- Gelmini said that he was being investigated largely because "my accusers probably found some anti-clerical prosecutor."
- Speaking to his community about the accusations, Gelmini said, "I guess they think we're all *froci*," a derogatory term in Italian that translates roughly as "queers."
- Gelmini has threatened to sue media outlets that have reported what he claims are unfounded details about the allegations, vowing to request "millions of euro" in damages.
- When retired Italian Cardinal Francesco Marchisano suggested that Gelmini should go into voluntary suspension until the charges are resolved, Gelmini shot back: "If anything, that cardinal should resign himself." Gelmini said he has no intention of stepping down, adding, "Mine is not a religious institution, but a lay one."
- Gelmini has said that he does not have "unconditional" confidence in the judicial system. "I've met some splendid judges, but there are also scoundrels who make people suffer as a kind of art, just to end up on the front pages of newspapers."

In the wake of such statements, one of Gelmini's lawyers resigned from the case, saying that while he has full confidence in the priest's innocence, he found Gelmini "impossible to control."

Rome's Chief Rabbi, Riccardo Di Segni, said he's glad that Gelmini withdrew the comment about Jews, but still finds it troubling.

"I'm pleased Fr. Gelmini has corrected himself," Di Segni said, "but his gaffe is nonetheless alarming because it reveals the ghosts of prejudices which are far from being dead and which re-emerge at the slightest opportunity."

Advertisement

Support for Gelmini from the political world has been strong. Several conservatives have announced plans to organize a "Pro-Gelmini Day." Former Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, a media mogul and founder of Italy's leading conservative party, called Gelmini to offer consolation, recounting his own long history of difficulties with the magistrates. On Gelmini's 80th birthday in 2005, Berlusconi donated roughly \$7 million to support the work of the Encounter Community.

So far, church authorities have been fairly circumspect about the case. Bishop Vincenzo Paglia of Terni limited himself to saying that he has "full confidence" in the local authorities. (Paglia, by the way, is a leading figure in the Community of Sant'Egidio and the official in charge of the sainthood cause for the late Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador.) The Vatican's Secretary of State, Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, said that "we want to get a clear picture" of the situation, adding that "some reports have been unfounded." Bertone was speaking from Nashville, where he was attending the annual convention of the Knights of Columbus.

Perhaps the most interesting comment by a church official has come from Msgr. Giovanni Nicolini, vicar for the Bologna archdiocese, who criticized what he saw as Gelmini's defensiveness.

"The church is not a fort under siege," Nicolini said. "If something like this were to happen to me, I wouldn't open my mouth, and above all I wouldn't shout about a plot against the church. I would recommend to Fr. Gelmini the silence of Christ before his accusers. If he stops crying out, he'll discover that there's no anti-clerical campaign in our society. In fact, we Catholics are highly esteemed. The true laceration is not between the church and the world, but inside the church. To project onto the whole church one's own personal affairs is the real anti-clerical threat."

On Thursday, the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests in the United States issued a statement about the Gelmini case.

"We are grateful for the courage of the victims of Fr. Pietro Gelmini who have broken their silence and revealed their abuse," it said. "Predators often prey upon those who are already vulnerable, without resources to defend themselves and who are among the least likely members of society to be believed. Molesters can often be high profile individuals who use their power to hide their crimes and attract victims."

"Reporting sexual abuse by a member of the clergy is very difficult anywhere, but with the church's power and influence in Italy it is especially difficult," the SNAP statement said. "We hope that anyone else who was abused by Gelmini will report these crimes to the police."

* * *

Speaking to reporters at the Knights of Columbus convention, Bertone, the number two official in the Catholic church after the pope, had some strong words about the sexual abuse crisis in the United States.

"The industry that has been created around this problem is scandalous," he said, according to a report in the Italian news agency ANSA. "It has nothing to do with cleaning up, or with respect for persons. It's an intolerable business." Bertone insisted that he would like to see "other institutions, all institutions, all social categories, if they have the courage that the church has had" in dealing with the crisis.

From some media coverage and public discussion, Bertone said, "It would seem as if only the Catholic church has this problem." He called that "a public falsehood, which merits the most severe condemnation, including penal condemnation." Without minimizing the gravity of the crisis, Bertone said, "it's a matter of a minimal percentage of the American church. It's scandalous, but it's a minimal percentage."

"The American church has already suffered greatly for this problem, and has handled it with great dignity," Bertone said. While serving as the number two official under then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger at the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Bertone said, he "accompanied the American church in all its suffering, and I saw the dignity, the courage and the patience that it's had on this issue."

Bertone said the church "has instituted assistance for the victims and also for the guilty, because we must not abandon the guilty to Hell, to perdition."

* * *

Today marks the funeral in Paris of Cardinal Jean-Marie Lustiger, who died on Sunday at the age of 80 after a two-year bout with an aggressive form of cancer. By any standard, Lustiger was a towering figure of 20th century Catholicism. Because Lustiger was a convert from Judaism, his biography also reflected the vicissitudes of the Jewish-Catholic relationship.

I was asked by the Wall Street Journal to offer an appreciation, which can be found here: [The Conservative Revolutionary](#)

* * *

Speaking of Catholic-Jewish relations, conversation continues to percolate on the subject of Pope Benedict's early July *motu proprio* liberalizing permission to celebrate the pre-Vatican II Latin Mass. Many leaders in Jewish-Catholic dialogue have voiced concern that the Good Friday liturgy according to the old rite contains a prayer for the conversion of the Jews, which refers to "the blindness of that people," asking God to remove "the veil from their hearts" and to deliver them from "darkness."

One little-known wrinkle is that on March 7, 1965, Pope Paul VI decreed a set of changes to the pre-Vatican II rite which removed the word "conversion" from the title "Prayer for the Jews" and deleted the language cited above. Instead, the revised prayer recalls God's "promises to Abraham and his seed." Church historians say that Paul made the revisions after the Second Vatican Council voted in favor of a more positive approach to relations with Jews, and the pope wanted to implement its new vision in the liturgy right away, even before the post-Vatican II Mass was ready.

Many experts seem to believe that those changes do not apply under the terms of the new *motu proprio*. Msgr. James Moroney, executive director of the Secretariat for the Liturgy for the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, said Aug. 9 that the *motu proprio* refers to the 1962 Missal alone, not to any subsequent amendments.

"As of now, it seems to me that it would not be possible to use texts published in 1965 when the permission is for the 1962 texts," Moroney said, though without excluding the possibility that the pope might wish to make changes in the future.

Some canonists, however, argue that because the 1965 revisions were never abrogated, they should be considered part of the 1962 Missal, just as subsequent amendments to the new rite issued after 1970 are still considered part of that Missal. Experts are awaiting clarification from the Vatican. Some believe that while the amendments from Paul VI were an improvement, the prayer remains problematic even with them, and would like to see it revised along the lines of the Prayer for the Jews in the post-Vatican II rite. That text asks that God help Jews "progress in fidelity to Your covenant."

On July 18, Bertone seemed to signal openness to such revisions, telling reporters that the Vatican had no intention of rolling back the clock on Jewish-Catholic relations and that "the problem can be solved."

Three other quick points are worth making in this regard.

First, the prayer for the Jews is not the only controversial bit of language in the Good Friday rite. There's also a prayer for "heretics and schismatics," referring to other Christians, and to "pagans," referring to followers of other religions. Many experts say both pose equally serious questions in terms of consistency with Vatican II's ecumenical and inter-religious vision.

Second, the pre-Vatican II rite has been available with the permission of the local bishop since 1984, which means that a certain percentage of Catholics have been hearing these prayers on Good Friday for the last 23 years. Whatever their theological limits, they did not prevent Catholicism from pursuing

pioneering efforts in Jewish-Catholic dialogue over that time, including John Paul's visit to the Rome synagogue in 1986 and the trip to Israel in 1999. That, perhaps, is an invitation to caution about worst-case scenarios in terms of what all this might mean.

Third, Catholics who celebrate the pre-Vatican II Mass say that even though it's sometimes called the "Missal of 1962," in fact many places don't follow the '62 Missal because it was expensive, hard to find, and quickly superseded by the new Mass. What people are actually using is often a Missal from the era of Pius XII or even earlier, because that's what they have lying around. This may mean they're still praying for the "perfidious Jews," because that language wasn't taken out until John XXIII in 1960. They're also often using catechetical materials and devotional aids utterly untouched by the vision of the council or the new Catechism of the Catholic Church. Some experts believe the spotlight on the old Mass created by the *motu proprio* will encourage these communities to bring themselves up to date. If nothing else, it should mean that the actual 1962 Missal will become more readily available, and that catechetical materials reflecting official post-conciliar church teaching will be produced.

Ironically, therefore, a decision perceived by a wide swath of the church and the outside world as an effort to roll back the clock, may instead be experienced by the people actually affected by it as an invitation to step forward.

* * *

Finally, some Jewish leaders have also expressed concern that a controversial Polish priest, Fr. Tadeusz Rydzyk, was among a group of Polish pilgrims who met Pope Benedict XVI at his summer residence in Castel Gandolfo last Sunday. Rydzyk is the head of a media empire in Poland that includes Radio Maryja, a conservative outlet with one of the largest broadcast audiences in the country, and a history of accusations of anti-Semitism. Recently, Rydzyk was recorded complaining about Jewish greed and suggesting that Polish President Lech Kaczynski is controlled by Jewish lobbies.

It should be stressed that, contrary to some initial accounts, this was not a "private audience," in the sense of a one-on-one session behind closed doors. It was more akin to a brief group photo op, but of course even that is sufficient in some quarters to suggest a papal seal of approval. (That is precisely how a Polish paper linked to Radio Maryja spun the event.) On Thursday, the Vatican put out a terse statement indicating that the brief encounter did not mark any change in the church's stance on Jewish-Catholic relations.

This is hardly the first time Radio Maryja has caused the pope headaches. Prior to Benedict's May 2006 trip to Poland, it broadcast an interview with a Polish academic warning about growing Jewish influence in global affairs. Some observers were hoping for a clear denunciation from the pope, but the closest he came was in a meeting with Polish clergy in which he said, "The priest is not asked to be an expert in economics, construction or politics. He is expected to be an expert in the spiritual life."

On the subject of Radio Maryja, many Polish observers say the pope is caught in something of a dilemma.

On the one hand, he does not want to encourage xenophobia or anti-Semitism. In his visit to the synagogue in Cologne, Germany, in 2005, Benedict said, "I intend to continue with great vigor on the path towards improved relations and friendship with the Jewish people." In his recent book *Jesus of Nazareth*, the exegete Benedict quoted at greatest length and with the most obvious fondness was American Rabbi Jacob Neusner.

On the other hand, there's a growing "culture war" in Poland these days between secular progressives and Catholic traditionalists, and Radio Maryja's large national following is an important element in the latter camp. In terms of Benedict's core objective, which is the defense of traditional Catholic identity, he needs their support. Most analysts believe the likely strategy from the Vatican and the Polish bishops will therefore continue to be to try to rein in Rzydzki without cutting him off completely -- explaining, perhaps, how he ended up in a picture with the pope.

*The e-mail address for John L. Allen Jr. is **jallen@ncronline.org***

Source URL (retrieved on 08/17/2017 - 11:03): <https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/all-things-catholic/sex-scandal-italy-appreciating-cardinal-lustiger-latin-mass-update-and>

Links:

[1] <https://www.ncronline.org/donate?clickSource=article-end>