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Papal preacher addresses 'serious hardship we priests are experiencing'

by Carol Glatz by Catholic News Service

VATICAN CITY -- Amid difficult moments facing the church, bishops, priests and deacons are called to conversion and to have hope in the future, the preacher of the papal household told Pope Benedict XVI and other top Vatican officials.

"Christ suffers more than we do for the humiliation of his priests and the affliction of his church," said Capuchin Father Raniero Cantalamessa, preacher of the papal household.

In his March 26 weekly Lenten meditation for the pope and his closest collaborators, Cantalamessa focused on readings from the Book of Lamentations and the Book of Jeremiah, including the prophet's crisis of faith and his lamenting of those who persecuted him.

The priest said the readings take on "particular significance if they are read in reference to the present moment of serious hardship we priests of the Catholic Church are experiencing," he said, referring to the growing revelations of sex abuse by clergy around the world and the increased media speculation over the role of the pope and the Vatican in handling past cases.

Cantalamessa said that in response to critics, God told Jeremiah to repent and return to the Lord, who would restore him. The prophet was told "if you bring forth the precious without the vile, you will be my mouthpiece."

The preacher addressed the pope specifically and reminded him that God told Jeremiah that before his detractors he would make him "a solid wall of brass. Though they fight against you, they shall not prevail. For I am with you to deliver and rescue you."

Cantalamessa said the church and its members are called to purify themselves and, if there is humility, then "the church will end up more resplendent than ever from this war."

"The media's tenacity -- and we have seen it in other cases -- in the long run will bring about the opposite effect that they had hoped for," he added.

He said the Year for Priests is a reminder to all ordained men to be faithful to Christ and the priesthood.

Fidelity means not betraying the trust that God and the church has invested, he said. Some examples of betrayal include living "a double life and not living up to one's priestly duties, especially concerning celibacy and chastity."

God brings hope and Christ invites everyone, especially those who are weary and oppressed, to go to him and be renewed, he said.

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"The best fruit to come from this Year for Priests would be a return to Christ and a renewal of our friendship with him," he said.

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