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Crisis hangs over pope in Malta like volcanic ash

by John L. Allen Jr.

NCR Today

By JOHN L. ALLEN JR.

Valletta, Malta

¶Though Pope Benedict XVI is struggling mightily to keep the focus on Malta and St. Paul during his weekend stopover here, fallout from the sexual abuse crisis continues to hang over the trip like the clouds of ash from an Icelandic volcano which are currently hovering over much of Europe.

¶Three fresh developments are keeping the crisis story alive, even as Benedict receives a warm and enthusiastic welcome from thousands of people in this tiny Mediterranean island nation:

- In Italy, an essay in the official newspaper of the Italian bishops' conference described a Nazi smear campaign against the Catholic church based on reports of pedophile priests which was orchestrated by Joseph Goebbels in 1937, hinting that criticism voiced on the same theme in recent weeks bears striking parallels;
- In Spain, a defiant Cardinal Dario Castrillón Hoyos, now 81 and retired, insisted that he had the approval of Pope John Paul II when he sent a letter to a French bishop in 2001 applauding him for not reporting an abuser priest to the police;
- In Germany, a report in the *Der Spiegel* newsmagazine, citing anonymous sources, claims that an official in the Archdiocese of Munich who claimed that he, not then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, had allowed an abuser priest back into ministry, is now saying that he felt pressure to take the blame and thus to "take the pope out of the firing line."
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Meanwhile, Benedict XVI did not meet today with local sex abuse victims in Malta who have requested a session with the pontiff, and trip organizers refused to say whether such a meeting remains possible for tomorrow.

The cumulative weight of events makes it seem as if Pope Benedict XVI can't escape the crisis even in ultra-Catholic Malta, which according to the New Testament offered St. Paul, the "Apostle to the Gentiles," safe harbor from a storm some 1,950 years ago.

Goebbels and "moral panic"

The Goebbels comparison came from Italian sociologist of religion Massimo Introvigne, writing in the April 16 edition of *L'Avvenire*, the official daily newspaper of the Italian bishops. Though Introvigne is a layman, *L'Avvenire* is generally held to reflect the thinking of senior levels of the Italian church and of the Vatican.

While Introvigne's essay is carefully documented, and he never directly compares critics of Benedict XVI to Goebbels or the Nazis, the implication nonetheless seems clear. The fact that it was given prominent treatment in an authoritative Catholic publication is also striking.

Introvigne argued that Goebbels went about creating a "moral panic" about priestly pedophilia in 1937 as a form of payback for an anti-Nazi encyclical from Pope Pius XI. The nature of a moral panic, he asserts, is to take a handful of real cases, and then to distort their numbers beyond recognition.

An English translation of the essay is available on the NCR web site here: <http://ncronline.org/blogs/ncr-today/sociologist-compares-todays-crisis-nazi-smear-campaign>

Castrillón Hoyos

Meanwhile, questions continue to mount about a 2001 letter from Cardinal Dario Castrillón Hoyos, at the time the prefect of the Vatican's Congregation for Clergy, to Bishop Pierre Pican of Bayeux-Lisieux, France.

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Pican was sentenced by a French court to three months in prison, though that term was suspended, for failing to report a French priest, Fr. René Bissey, who was convicted in October 2000 for sexual abuse of eleven minor boys between 1989 and 1996.

Castrillón wrote to Pican in September 2001, saying: "I rejoice to have a colleague in the episcopate that, in the eyes of history and all the other bishops of the world, preferred prison rather than denouncing one of his sons, a priest."

That letter was published earlier this week by the French Catholic publication *Golias*.

After that report appeared, a Vatican statement attempted to distance the Vatican, and Pope Benedict XVI, from Castrillón's letter. Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi, the Vatican spokesperson, said the letter offers "another confirmation of how timely was the unification of the treatment of cases of sexual abuse of minors on the part of members of the clergy under the competence of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith."

That congregation was led by then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, the man who is now the pope, and who is credited with taking a more aggressive approach to sex abuse cases. In effect, the thrust of the Vatican statement was to suggest that Castrillón's letter illustrated the problems that Ratzinger faced in kick-starting the Vatican into action.

On Friday, however, during a conference at a Catholic university in Murcia, Spain, the 81-year-old Castrillón insisted that he had shown the letter in advance to John Paul II, and that the late pope had authorized him not only to send it but to eventually post it on the internet.

Castrillón said that the issue at stake in his letter was protection of the seal of the confessional. The cardinal said he was applauding Pican for maintaining the sanctity of the sacrament, and cited canon 983 of the Code of Canon Law, concerning the confessional.

Some analysts have questioned whether the sanctity of the confessional directly applies in this case, since Pican said in 2001 that he had discussed the case with the victims and with another priest. French law recognizes the seal of the confessional as part of a protected category of "professional secrets," but makes an exception for crimes committed against minors.

According to reports in the Spanish media, senior church officials at the conference, including two Vatican cardinals, applauded when Castrillón issued his defense.

Beyond the specific question of the confessional, Castrillón has long been among those church leaders who argue that bishops should not be put in the position of reporting their priests to the police or other authorities, on the grounds that it disrupts a father/son relationship with his clergy. Instead, such leaders suggest, bishops should encourage the victims themselves to make a report.

Asked about Castrillón's statements during a press briefing tonight in Malta, Lombardi said that he wouldn't go beyond his statement earlier in the week, except to point out that the 2001 document assigning responsibility for sex abuse cases to Ratzinger's office was signed "by John Paul II, not by me," and invited journalists "to draw the conclusions."

Gruber backtracking?

When media outlets first reported on the case of Peter Hullermann, a German priest from the diocese of Essen who came into the Archdiocese of Munich facing accusations of abuse while Ratzinger was archbishop and was given another assignment there, the General Vicar of Munich from the time, Gerhard Gruber, immediately took responsibility.

In statements released both by the Munich archdiocese and by the Vatican, Gruber said that he had been responsible for personnel decisions and that Ratzinger was not informed of the details of the Hullermann case.

Now, however, *Der Spiegel* is reporting that Gruber has privately told friends that he felt pressure to act as a "scapegoat." According to the account, he was sent a fax with the details of the statement already prepared and felt pressure to sign off on it.

Der Spiegel does not cite any sources for its account. Asked about it tonight, Lombardi declined comment because he had not yet seen the article.

Many analysts feel that of the cases from Benedict's past which have arisen in recent weeks, Hullermann

remains the most potentially serious for the pope. The others concern his years at the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, and often his role came late in the process and was relatively marginal. Hullermann, however, came into Munich on Ratzinger's watch, apparently without explicit restrictions on his ministry, and went on to abuse other people for which he was criminally convicted in 1986.

If Gruber indeed back-tracks from his original assertion of full responsibility, it could draw new attention to the pope's role in the Hullermann case.

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