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Head of Vatican court describes 'VatiLeaks' as 'most grave crimes'

by Sarah Mac Donald by Catholic News Service



U.S. Cardinal Raymond L. Burke in the chapel of his residence at the Vatican in June (CNS/Paul Haring)

CORK, Ireland -- The head of the Vatican's highest court described the spate of leaks of confidential Vatican documents as "most grave crimes" and warned that those responsible must be discovered and "appropriately sanctioned."

Cardinal Raymond L. Burke, prefect of the Supreme Court of the Apostolic Signature, said the confidentiality of Pope Benedict XVI's communications must be respected in order for the pope to carry out his work in service of the church.

"It is not a question of hiding anything but of respecting conscience," the U.S.-born cardinal told reporters following his address to the Fifth Fota International Liturgy Conference.

He added he was appalled by what had happened in the events, dubbed "VatiLeaks" by the Italian media.

"I am trusting and praying that these people will be discovered and they will be properly sanctioned," he said.

Speaking Monday, the final day of the three-day conference focusing on the theme "Celebrating the Eucharist: Sacrifice and Communion," Burke discussed the Eucharist as sacrifice in canonical history.

The cardinal particularly mentioned Canon 818, which safeguards against a priest celebrating Mass introducing his own wording, prayers or preaching according to his own judgment.

Asked about a priest in the Diocese of Belleville, Ill., who in June was removed as a pastor because he introduced new wording in the liturgy to make it "more meaningful," Burke explained that any priest who took such liberties would have been warned by his bishop. Only if the priest persisted, he explained, would sanctions be imposed.

"The priest is the servant of the rite. Christ has given us the sacred liturgy in his church and the priest serves. He is not the protagonist," Burke said.

"It is absolutely wrong for the priest to start making changes to make it more interesting because he wants to make the liturgy better," he added.

Burke also warned against excessive use of the concelebration of liturgy and called for the practice to be reviewed where it is used repeatedly. He told the conference that excessive use of concelebration could result in priests losing sight of the fullness of their office and an understanding of the Eucharist as a sacrifice.

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After his presentation the cardinal spoke with Catholic News Service about the U.S. bishops' Fortnight for Freedom, commending the nationwide campaign to address what church officials consider government infringements on religious freedom. Burke criticized government actions and policies that, he said, were aimed at reducing freedom of conscience and the right to worship as one pleased.

"The thinking behind this is that religion has nothing to do with public life and that within your church or chapel you can worship as you please but that can't have anything to do with your public life," he said.

Burke warned such thinking was "absolutely contrary" to the Christian understanding of conscience. He stressed that sacred liturgy, which was conference's focus, had a direct impact on forming Catholics' consciences and, as a consequence, had a direct impact on their public lives.

Commending the U.S. bishops for their stance on the federal contraceptive mandate under the health reform law recently upheld by the U.S. Supreme Court, the cardinal said he was "praying for them that they will be able to continue even in the face of persecution."

He said what the bishops were attempting to achieve was "needed to save (the U.S.) from a sort of totalitarianism in which the state dictates what people are to think and do."

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