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Rome debates funeral for Nazi war criminal

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Pope Francis clearly has identified mercy as the spiritual cornerstone of his pontificate, and the impression of deep compassion he's given over the last eight months goes a long way toward explaining his appeal.

As a pastoral matter, however, it's not always easy to determine what "mercy" implies in concrete cases. In Rome right now, debate over whether a Catholic funeral ought to be held for Erich Priebke, a former Nazi SS officer responsible for the massacre of 335 Italians in 1944, including 57 Jews, illustrates the point.

Priebke died Friday at the age of 100, having lived the last 17 years of his life in Italy under house arrest. Ironically, his death came the same day that Pope Francis received a delegation from the Jewish community of Rome, insisting, as he has before, that "a Christian cannot be anti-Semitic."

Priebke was sentenced to life imprisonment in 1996 by an Italian court for organizing the infamous Ardeatine caves massacre, in which 335 Italians were executed in reprisal for an attack on German troops by antifascist resistance forces. By his own admission, Priebke personally shot two of the prisoners and supervised the deaths of the others.

Priebke never expressed public remorse, insisting he was following orders, and after his death, his lawyer released a seven-page testament in which the former SS official essentially denied the Holocaust, claiming that alleged crematoria in Nazi concentration camps were actually large kitchens for feeding inmates.

Today's debate boils down to this: Given that Priebke apparently identified himself as a Catholic, though there's little evidence he ever practiced the faith, should a funeral for him be celebrated in a Catholic

church?

Francis may well take a personal interest in the matter, given that Priebke fled to Argentina after the war and spent 50 years living comfortably in a Buenos Aires suburb prior to his extradition to Italy in 1996.

On Saturday, the Vicariate of Rome under Italian Cardinal Agostino Vallini, which administers the Rome diocese in the name of the pope, issued a statement saying no funeral for Priebke would be held in a Roman church.

On background, officials of the vicariate cited canon 1184 of the Code of Canon Law, which states that a funeral may be denied to "manifest sinners who cannot be granted ecclesiastical funerals without public scandal of the faithful."

Riccardo Pacifici, head of the Jewish community in Rome, hailed the veto as "a singular decision in history," saying it supports what Francis said about the impossibility of being both Christian and anti-Semitic.

On the other side of the argument is Swiss Cardinal Georges Cottier, the former theologian of the papal household under Pope John Paul II, who told reporters Saturday that mercy extends even to "great sinners."

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"I hope that in the last instant of his life, this man found a way to change his mind and to repent, but we'll never know what happened," Cottier said in one interview. "God knows, and God can forgive."

Now 91, Cottier in retirement has become something of a hero for Catholic progressives, among other things defending the University of Notre Dame's decision in 2009 to invite President Barack Obama to deliver its commencement address.

In an interview, Cottier conceded there are cases in which funerals might be denied, but implies it ought to be rare because "everyone needs prayer."

With Priebke, he suggested taking precautions to avoid scandal, including "a very simple and sober rite."

That said, he favored allowing a funeral to take place.

"I think that if funerals were denied to everyone who committed evil during their lives, it would be anticipating the judgment of God," he said.

Part of the reason the debate is so animated is because Priebke's lawyer originally suggested the funeral could take place Wednesday, which is also the 70th anniversary of the deportation of Roman Jews in 1943, many of whom eventually died in Nazi concentration camps.

Events commemorating the occasion are planned around Rome, and Francis issued a message saying the anniversary is a call "to never justify the evil we encounter" and "to never lower our guard against anti-Semitism and racism, wherever it comes from."

Priebke's lawyer later said the funeral would be delayed, but he still intends to hold one somewhere -- if not in Italy, he said, then perhaps Germany, where Priebke was born and where some family members

still reside, or in Argentina. If it can't happen in a church, he said, then a private ceremony will be arranged.

Meanwhile, Catholics will ponder what mercy means as applied to the death of someone like Priebke.

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