

THE CHURCH IN THE WORLD

Pope endorses G8 line on Middle East conflict

Robert Mickens
In Rome

POPE BENEDICT and Catholic bishops around the world have expressed deep concern that fighting in Lebanon between Israel and Hezbollah militias could expand into a wider regional conflict. And they have called for an immediate ceasefire and the beginning of peace talks.

The Pope last Sunday said “neither terrorist acts nor the retaliation” could be justified, repeating the words pronounced by his Secretary of State two days earlier. The Pope spoke after the weekly Angelus from his vacation chalet in the Italian Alps and expressed “serious worries” over an “extension of the bellicose actions” and “the numerous victims among the civilian population”. He invited “local Churches” around the world to offer special prayers for peace in the Holy Land and the entire Middle East. He also remembered the people of the third-largest Israeli city of Haifa, home of some 20,000 Christians and about a dozen Carmelite monks of Our Lady of Mt Carmel.

Two days later, on returning to his retreat



Israeli soldiers pray near a mobile artillery unit firing into southern Lebanon on 17 July. CNS photo/Ronen Zvulun, Reuters

after a walk in the mountains, the Pope said he agreed entirely with the communiqué issued by the G8 leaders at the summit in St Petersburg that ended on Monday. The G8 blamed the Hezbollah and Hamas militants for the escalation in fighting, and urged Israel to exercise restraint. “I fully agree with the G8 communiqué,” the Pope said. “It seems to me that this indicates the road [to take]. I have nothing else to add except to add the importance of prayer so that God may help us.”

Israel launched its assault on Hezbollah positions in Lebanon on 12 July after Hezbollah fighters captured two of its soldiers. About 270 Lebanese people had been

killed by Wednesday this week, most of them civilians. Twenty-five Israelis had died – 13 civilians and 12 members of the military. Hezbollah rocket attacks have hit the northern city of Haifa, as well as Safed, Acre, Kiryat Shemona, and the Gush Halav region near Safed. Hotels in northern Israel, including the Church of Scotland’s Scots Hotel in Tiberias, were evacuated.

“UN Reduced to Inaction as Lebanon Burns”, said the headline on the cover of *L’Osservatore Romano* on Sunday, the same day the Pope made his appeal. The Vatican paper said the “principal decision-making organ of the international community” was “once again a spectator in the face of the death of law, violated by both sides”. Cardinal Angelo Sodano, the Vatican’s Secretary of State, said on 14 July that the Holy See deplored Israel’s attack on Lebanon, “a free and sovereign nation”.

Those comments were echoed by church leaders in the Middle East, some of whom said they could understand the Jewish state’s reaction, but judged it as beyond proportion. “[The Israelis] have to do something in response,” said Fr Michael McGarry, rector of the Tantur Ecumenical Institute in Jerusalem. But, in an interview with Catholic News Service, he said: “Killing civilians is not appropriate.”

The head of the 300 Franciscans who oversee most of the Christian holy sites in the region, Fr Pierbattista Pizzaballa OFM, appealed to the United States and the European Union to intervene before the violence spun out of control.

Middle East special features, pages 4-7

ROME

Pilgrims boost Vatican’s record surplus

Robert Mickens
At the Vatican

VATICAN REVENUES soared to an eight-year high in 2005, despite the £4.8-million cost of the funeral of Pope John Paul II and the Conclave that elected Pope Benedict XVI. Spending by pilgrims in Rome for the Pope’s funeral may well have been responsible for the surge in revenue at the Vatican Museums, post office and other shops.

Cardinal Sergio Sebastiani, president of the Prefecture of the Economic Affairs of the Holy See, told reporters at a press conference last week that the Holy See’s £6.6m surplus in the last fiscal

year was due to improved exchange rates and higher interest on investments. The Holy See made a surplus of £2.1m in 2004, after four years in the red.

The 2005 figure covered expenditure and revenue for all Roman Curia offices, the Vatican’s diplomatic missions around the world, its media operations, and its investments.

A separate budget sheet for Vatican City State – which includes the Vatican Museums and post office – showed an even more impressive surplus of £20.25m, of which £8.1m was used to cover half the cost of the Vatican’s biggest money-loser – Vatican Radio.

Cardinal Sebastiani said the Holy See made more than £29.4m on its investments in 2005, compared with only £4.2m in 2004. He said that the £15.2m income from property was down from £17m the previous year.

During the papal transition the Holy See incurred extraordinary costs such as the traditional extra pay given to Vatican employees on the occasion of a pope’s death and again after the election of a new pope, as well as beefed-up security, employee overtime, and temporary modifications of the Sistine Chapel for the Conclave.

Bishops’ conferences, religious

orders and other Catholic organisations – which are requested by Canon Law to support the running of the Holy See – gave 1.3 per cent less in 2005 than in the previous year. A third of the £14.7m that was collected in this category, however, came from the United States.

The annual “Peter’s Pence” collection, which is made up of donations from the Catholic faithful across the world, netted £32.5m. Those funds, which the Pope then uses for charitable purposes, showed an increase of nearly 15 per cent on 2004. Nearly 30 per cent of the total came from Catholics in the United States.

EL SALVADOR

194 gangsters arrested in church

Colin Harding

ONE hundred and ninety-four members of one of El Salvador's most notorious street gangs were rounded up by police last week, while they were attending a church vigil for four of their comrades who had been killed in a drive-by shooting on the previous day. The parish priest, Br Domingo Solis, a Franciscan friar, protested when police special forces burst into the Reina de la Paz (Queen of Peace) church in Soyapango, near the capital, San Salvador, early on the morning of 12 July. The forces ignored the protest and arrested 194 members of Mara 18, one of two youth gangs blamed by the Government for most of the violent crimes in a country with the highest murder rate in Latin America. In 2005 there were 3,761 killings in El Salvador, whose population is under seven million. That compares with 833 murders in England and Wales in 2004.

Br Solis said he had reached a prior understanding with the police to allow the gang members and their families to attend the vigil, but the national police commissioner, Rodrigo Avila, told the priest that Salvadorean law permitted the police to enter a church in hot pursuit of suspects. The raid took place after a policeman was shot dead by a member of Mara 18, known as El Shaggy, in Soyapango on the previous evening.

There are at least 80,000 gang members in Central America, most of them in El Salvador and neighbouring Honduras. The two big organisations, Mara 18 and Mara Salvatrucha, originated on the streets of Los Angeles in the 1980s, among the children of Central American immigrants. Many of them were deported to their parents' countries of origin. El Salvador's conservative President, Elias Antonio "Tony" Saca, has been pursuing a hard-line law-and-order policy against the maras.

UNITED STATES

Milingo resurfaces to condemn mandatory celibacy

Rocco Palmo

In Philadelphia

THE CONTROVERSIAL Zambian archbishop Emmanuel Milingo last week announced an "independent charismatic ministry" to reconcile illicitly married priests with the Church. Speaking in Washington after vanishing from his Rome residence in late June, Archbishop Milingo proclaimed "the end of mandatory celibacy".

The Vatican publicly "deplored" the bishop's actions. Nevertheless, the archbishop made clear his intent to be reunited with the Korean acupuncturist, Maria Sung, whom he married in 2001 in a New York ceremony of the Revd Sun Myung Moon's Unification Church. He reconciled with the Holy See shortly after a "public canonical admonition" from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith threatened him with excommunication.

After his disappearance from Rome, the Zambian Government instituted a search for its "important and respected citizen", before

the archbishop resurfaced in the American capital, calling for married ex-priests to "unleash your burden of humiliation, exclusivity, and shame".

"The Church has nothing to lose by allowing priests the option to marry," Archbishop Milingo said at the press conference. "Historically, out of holy marriages have come priests, popes, saints and loving servants of God and the Church."

Archbishop Milingo is staying in America as the guest of the African American Catholic Congregation (AACC), which broke communion with Rome in 1989. Archbishop George Stallings, an excommunicated priest who heads the AACC, was married in the same Unification Church ceremony at which Archbishop Milingo and Ms Sung publicised their union.

Last week, Archbishop Stallings told *The Tablet* that Archbishop Milingo intended to embark on a six-month speaking tour of the United States, and confirmed the latter's intent to reunite with Ms Sung, whom "he has always considered his wife".

All eyes on Nuncio as bishops reach 75

NEVER FAR from the spotlight, the issue of episcopal appointments in the United States has returned to centre stage as two prominent bishops reached the Church's mandatory retirement age, writes Rocco Palmo.

The seventy-fifth birthdays celebrated last week by Archbishop Thomas Kelly OP of Louisville and Bishop Charles Grahmann of Dallas sparked a renewal of interest in Pope Benedict XVI's gradual re-shaping of the American hierarchy.

Since arriving in Washington in the spring, the new Apostolic Nuncio Archbishop Pietro Sambi – the pivotal figure in the appointment process – has so far yielded few clues on his manner of approach.

While the May announcement of Pope Benedict's most prominent US appointment to date, Archbishop Donald Wuerl of Washington, was greeted with widespread acclaim across unusually broad swathes of Catholic opinion, the prevalent trend has seen the stop-gap measure of current diocesan bishops being sent to new dioceses at an unprecedented rate.

However, as the Pope continues to impose his stamp on the vetting process, and as eight of the US Church's 195 dioceses stand vacant (with many more bishops still serving who have surpassed the canonical age-limit), the second half of the year will provide telling indicators of the course that Benedict XVI intends to chart.

RUSSIA

Russian Orthodox Church welcomes Basayev killing

Josef Pazderka

In Prague

RUSSIAN SPECIAL forces had the right to kill the Chechen rebel leader and terrorist Shamil Basayev, according to the Moscow Orthodox Patriarchate. Basayev, Russia's most wanted man, died during a special forces operation in Ingushetia, a region neighbouring Chechnya, on 10 July.

"The Russian Orthodox Church has never doubted the secular powers' right to use force to protect citizens from militant evil," the secretary for Church-State relations of the Moscow Patriarchate, Mikhail Dudko, said. He pointed out that the Russian Orthodox Church did not want the war in predominantly Islamic Chechnya to be interpreted as confrontation between Christianity

and Islam. "We say firmly that the actions of people like Basayev distort the Islamic teaching, while accusations of Russia waging a religious war in the Caucasus are groundless," Dudko added.

Shamil Basayev, born in 1965, professed to be a devout Muslim. He had links to Islamic militants in other countries and claimed responsibility for the Beslan school siege of 2004 in which 331 peo-

ple died, more than half of them children. A rebel website called him a *shakhid* or Islamic holy martyr. However, the Chechen Mufti, Sultan Mirzayev, disagreed.

"Basayev killed dozens of religious workers in Chechnya, who had read Koran, for whom the ideas of Islam were sacred. Not a single true Muslim would dare call this person a *shakhid*, or a man who died in a jihad," Mirza-

INDIA

Churches prepare to take on Kerala Communists

Anto Akkara

In Trichur

CHURCHES IN the southern Indian state of Kerala issued a joint pastoral letter this week protesting at new legislation by the Communist-led Kerala Government that would take away their right to run Christian colleges independently.

The new law – the Kerala Professional Colleges Act, passed last month – denies “minority” status to medical and engineering colleges run by the Churches. This status is the basis of their autonomy. The Indian constitution accords religious minorities special rights “to manage and administer” their institutions.

Since professional education was privatised in 2001, 70 engineering and nine medical colleges have been established in the self-financing sector in Kerala. These colleges have close to 10,000 seats for engineering and 800 seats in medical colleges. Of the medical colleges, five are Christian, of which three are Catholic, while the others are Muslim and Hindu. The Communists have ruled that if a particular educational sector makes up a large part of the total sector, as the Christian colleges do,

then it must lose its rights to minority status. By this means the success of the Christian colleges has been turned against them.

Most significantly the colleges lose their rights over admissions policy. Formerly, 50 per cent of admissions were decided by the college and 50 per cent by the Government. The new law means that the Government determines all admissions.

“We are planning to educate the faithful at the parish level on the danger it [the new legislation] poses to the Christian community,” auxiliary Bishop Andrews Thazhath of Trichur archdiocese told *The Tablet* this week.

Archbishop Joseph Powathil, the Kerala Catholic Bishops’ Council’s education commission chairman, said the act went against the rights granted to the minority communities in the Constitution. Describing it as a move to “nationalise” minority-run institutions, he said it would be strongly opposed.

“This is a deliberate step to deny our fundamental right. It is like punishing us for taking the lead in professional education,” said Bishop Thazhath, who is spokesperson for church leaders of a number of different Christian denominations.

Nun’s death prompts call for inquiry into high suicide rates at convents

Ellen Teague

THE SUICIDE of a Catholic nun in Kerala has prompted church leaders to call for an investigation into the high rate of suicides in convents in the southern Indian state.

“We are honest to admit the problem and we have to sort it out,” Montfort Brother Varghese Theckenath, president of India’s Conference of Religious, said last week.

Kerala, which has more than 33,000 nuns, has seen 15 cases of suicide among nuns in the past 12 years.

The latest was a 34-year-old Clarist Sister whose body was found on 23 June in the guestroom of her convent, near the city of Kottayam.

Sr Lisa had consumed poison – traces of pesticide were found, along with a suicide note citing disappointment in life.

Her father, Joseph Thottathil, blamed the convent, saying his daughter was unhappy about an impending transfer to another location, but that “she never got justice from her superiors”.

Fr Paul Thelakat, editor of the local church weekly *Satyadeepam* (“Lamp of Truth”), suggested that priests “get lots of opportunities to meet people and exchange their views, but women Religious are closeted in the convents”.

Sr Ely, superior of a Franciscan convent in the state capital of Thiruvananthapuram, pointed out that nuns in India were given “very limited opportunity” to air grievances. She felt that formation programmes needed to be reviewed because “society, the Church and family” discouraged nuns from quitting the convent once they had entered.

SOUTH AFRICA

World Cup ‘will help South Africa’

SOUTH AFRICA needs to put its heart into hosting the 2010 soccer World Cup because it will bring enormous benefits to the country, according to a spokesman of the Southern African Catholic Bishops’ Conference (SACBC), writes *Ellen Teague*.

“The work involved in getting ready will be an economic injection for the country that will provide much-needed jobs,” Kabelo Selema, who heads the Justice and Peace department of the SACBC, said last week.

Speaking a few days after President Thabo Mbeki unveiled the emblem for the 2010 event, Mr Selema said it would bring people together and promote reconciliation among South

Africans of different races. The African continent’s pride in hosting the event for the first time would also, he thought, “be a boost to Africa as a whole”.

Since apartheid ended in 1994, South Africa has hosted the cricket and rugby World Cups, but the soccer World Cup is much larger. “When work starts in earnest in building infrastructure and meeting transport needs, optimism about the event will increase,” Mr Selema said. Some have raised concerns about South Africa’s ability to host the World Cup in the light of its high levels of poverty and crime, but in his view “we should focus our energies on proving them wrong”.

MALAWI

Bomber strikes during Mass

THREE PEOPLE were seriously injured and 21 others escaped with minor injuries after an unknown assailant set off a home-made bomb during Mass in a church in Lilongwe, the capital of Malawi, last Sunday.

Peter Madeso, the parish priest of St Francis Church, Kanengo, a populous township outside the capital, said he heard an explo-

sion around 8.45 a.m. while he was presiding over Mass.

“There was general pandemonium with people running in all directions,” he said.

More than 800 people were gathered for Mass at the time of the incident.

The bomber, whose motives remain unknown, fled the scene.

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AUSTRALIA

Australians split over stem cell research

Mark Brolly

In Melbourne

AUSTRALIA'S FEDERAL and state governments failed last week to reach agreement on the way forward for the country's stem cell researchers, who are ethically split over the continuing use of human embryos in their work.

Three states, Victoria, Queensland and the Australian Capital Territory, have said they will lift the current ban on therapeutic cloning to help scientists advance to what they say is the next step of embryonic stem cell research, despite lack of support from Canberra.

Their move is firmly opposed by the Australian Prime Minister, John Howard, who said that the federal Government will provide no assistance, adding: "The Commonwealth's disposition at present is not to agree any legislative changes."

His remarks come as Australia's leading immunologist, Sir Gustav Nossal, was arguing that embryonic stem cell research was rich in

promise but that the science had reached the point where it was pushing against the boundaries of existing legislation.

In an article in the daily newspaper *The Australian*, Sir Gustav, a senior Catholic clinician, said it was time for the next step of Somatic Cell Nuclear Transfer – a controversial move for many as it initially resembles the cloning involved in that of Dolly the sheep.

"No responsible scientist would contemplate cloning a human being, so why do we want SCNT?" wrote Sir Gustav, a former Australian of the Year, going on to explain: "As a Catholic I deeply value my nine years at a Jesuit school, and my career as a medical scientist has further deepened my respect and reverence for human life. Embedded in this value is the belief that everyone should be given the opportunity to live as free from serious illness as medical science can ensure."

"I do not know whether or when stem cell science will provide the breakthroughs we so earnestly hope for [but] the history of science shows that significant discoveries assiduously followed sooner or later provide benefits."

"Australian legislators must now decide whether our scientists will be allowed to keep pace with the world's best or whether they will gradually fall behind. Here's hoping for a change of heart at the highest political level in the land," he wrote.

However, Sir Gustav's position is under fire from those opposed to the cloning of embryos to obtain stem cells. Catholic ethicist Dr Norman Ford, a Salesian priest and director of the Caroline Chisholm Centre for Health Ethics based in Melbourne, argues that, while there is "universal agreement" on using some stem cells for medical research and therapeutic purposes, there was no need to clone human embryos to get them.

Utilitarian arguments of benefit for all through the use of embryonic cells faltered, said Dr Ford, because there are alternative sources of stem cells. He added: "There is no need to clone human embryos: human life should not be created only to be destroyed."

Dr Ford said that many objected to the destruction of six- or seven-day-old embryos to obtain stem cells for research, but that such cells could morally be created by using human eggs without a nucleus through the action of a gene called Nanog.

"This would make both pragmatic and ethical sense without the need of therapeutic cloning. This and other approaches which are not dependent on destruction of embryos are the way forward for an ethical consensus on stem cell research. It would be socially advantageous to all researchers and clinicians, and less divisive for the whole community," said Dr Ford.

GERMANY

Lehmann lambasts ethics council

Christa Pongratz-Lippitt

In Vienna

THE RELUCTANCE of the German National Ethics Council expressly to forbid assisted suicide organisations in Germany has come in for sharp criticism by both Catholic and Lutheran churchmen.

In their declaration, entitled "Self-determination and Care of the Dying", which was published last week, the 25 members of the council, an independent advisory body inaugurated by the German federal Government in 2001 to establish a forum for dialogue on ethical issues in the life sciences, stated that assisted suicide should remain forbidden and punishable by law in Germany.

However, it did not expressly condemn doctors or organisations assisting people who wish to commit suicide.

For the first time, the Catholic members of the Council, which include auxiliary Bishop Losinger

of Augsburg, formulated an additional statement in which they cautioned against organisations whose sole purpose it was to assist people to commit suicide. "Once such organisations are tolerated or find social, cultural or legal acceptance, society can no longer carry out its mandate to protect those in danger of taking their own lives," they declared.

The president of the German bishops' conference, Cardinal Karl Lehmann of Mainz, deplored the widely differing opinions on assisted suicide. It was "especially disconcerting" that the council had given the impression that several members had agreed only to forbid assisted suicide "out of consideration for Germany's particular historical situation", he said.

Euthanasia is a particularly sensitive issue in both Germany and Austria, because the memory of Hitler's euthanasia programme, which aimed to rid society of people who were considered "unworthy of life", is still very real.

■ THE OFFICIAL itinerary for the Pope's six-day visit to his native Bavaria was announced by the Vatican last week, writes Christa Pongratz-Lippitt. The Pope will leave Rome for Munich, where he was archbishop from 1977 to 1982, by plane on Saturday 9 September and stay there for two nights. On 11 September he

will visit the Marian shrine at Altötting and nearby Markt am Inn where he was born. On 12 September he will proceed to Regensburg, where he taught theology and where his older brother, Mgr Georg Ratzinger, the former director of the famous Regensburg cathedral choir, still lives. The Pope's parents and his sister Maria,

who died in 1991, are buried in Regensburg and the Pope himself still owns a house there.

The director of papal ceremonies, Archbishop Piero Marini, visited Bavaria last week to discuss the liturgies the Pope will celebrate in Munich, Altötting, Regensburg, and Freising, where the Pope studied and was ordained.

SWITZERLAND

12 more years for Fellay

BERNARD FELLAY, 48, has been re-elected superior general of the Fraternity of St Pius X (the Lefebvrists) for 12 more years, the fraternity announced on 11 July.

The Lefebvrists, who number 150,000 in the world, are currently negotiating with Rome for a reconciliation with the Church.

The election of Bishop Fellay, who met Pope Benedict last August and said he was certain that one day there would be no more problems between the fraternity and Rome, marked a victory over Bishops Richard Williamson and Bernard Tissier de Mallerais, who are much more hostile to reconciliation.

Ordained a priest in 1982, in the schismatic organisation which is opposed to the reforms of the Second Vatican Council, he was consecrated a bishop by Archbishop Lefebvre in 1988 without the sanction of the Vatican, warranting the fraternity's excommunication.

IN BRIEF

New encyclical

Pope Benedict XVI is currently working on the draft of a new social encyclical on work, according to a Latin American Catholic news agency. "Aciprensa" said this week that the encyclical would bear the name *Labor Domini* and would put forth a Christian vision of work, the importance of work in society, and work as a human duty and necessity. The writing project is just one of the activities the Pope reportedly is spending time on during his 11-28 July summer holiday in the Italian Alps. Sources say he is also finishing a book, *Jesus*, which he began before becoming Pope. Last summer Pope Benedict spent some of his holiday writing his first encyclical, *Deus Caritas Est*, which was released several months later.

Ugandan peace talks under way

Peace talks between the Ugandan Government and rebels of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) have begun in Juba, southern Sudan, mediated by the South Sudan regional government and by, among other groups, the Rome-based Sant'Egidio community. Last week, Uganda confirmed that LRA leader Joseph Kony and his commanders will be given total amnesty if a deal is reached by mid-September, despite objections from the International Criminal Court, which wants to prosecute them for war crimes related to atrocities during the 19-year insurgency. Archbishop John Baptist Odama of Gulu has welcomed the amnesty, having often warned that efforts to bring Kony into custody were "blocking the peace initiative".

Cardinal dies at 89

Cardinal Angel Suquía Goicoechea, who served as bishop for 28 years in four different Spanish dioceses, has died at the age of 89. In a telegram from the Vatican, Pope Benedict XVI praised the late Spanish churchman for his "generous and intense" pastoral charity and his "deep love for the Church". He died after a long illness on 13 July at his home in San Sebastián in the Basque country.

Cardinal Suquía's funeral was held last Saturday at the Cathedral of Madrid where he served as archbishop from 1983 until his retirement in 1994. He had also been bishop of Almería (1966-69) and Málaga (1969-73), and archbishop of Santiago de Compostela (1973-83).

Correction

In the story "Jesuit bishop appointed in Australia" in *The Tablet* of 15 July, Fr Greg O'Kelly was described, through an editing error, as having responsibility for a territory "twice the size of France [with] a tiny Catholic population". The reference was to the South Australia of 158 years ago, when the Jesuits arrived in Port Adelaide.

Letter from Rome

Like many places in Europe, Rome has already registered several days of unseasonably high temperatures. And more are on the way. This is not good news for the elderly, for whom summer can be a lonely and precarious time, especially those who are too ill or poor to get out of town for holidays. During most of the year there are a number of places and organisations where those who need it can get help, but staff and services are often sharply reduced during the summer months – especially in August. The Community of Sant'Egidio, in the "typical" Roman neighbourhood of Trastevere, is one exception.

Since it was founded in the wake of the Second Vatican Council it has become one of the city's major providers of food, shelter and other assistance for the needy, with a special concern for old folks. Community members and other volunteers have already begun taking groups of pensioners on 15- to 20-day outings to cooler and calmer environs at nearby lakes or hilltop towns. And for those who are too old or too frail to leave their homes, the community has spearheaded an awareness campaign throughout Italy that offers tips to the elderly on how to survive the heat and solitude of summer.

Sant'Egidio's "neighbourhood network" – already in place for the past three years in Trastevere and the nearby Testaccio quarter – has enlisted building porters and local merchants to help keep an eye out for the older people in their neighbourhood. It's a pilot project supported by the Italian Health Ministry that Sant'Egidio hopes will soon spread throughout Rome and all of the country. And for those who want some spiritual fellowship, the community chants Vespers every evening at 8.30 p.m. in the Basilica of Santa Maria in Trastevere. Naturally, you needn't be old to join in.

It seems that popes are never really allowed to go on holidays; at least not the popes of the media age. Take the case of poor Pope Benedict. For the second summer running he's taken his annual July break in the Italian Alps at the same Salesian-owned chalet that his Polish predecessor used for his holidays. Papa Ratzinger didn't only inherit the venue, but he also got stuck with the television cameras, scrum of reporters and hundreds (even thousands) of curious "pilgrims" who linger around the area when he's there on holiday. This means that every time the Pope walks out of his door he's cast right back into the spotlight. Some holiday!

Joseph Ratzinger used to wear trousers around the Borgo Pio and even, at times, to his office when he was a mere cardinal. Now he hikes through the mountains dressed in a formal white cassock and

"relaxes" at the piano donned with his papal skullcap and French cufflinks. At least those are the images Vatican Television (CTV) and *L'Osservatore Romano* are projecting of the holidaymaking pontiff. CTV put out a five-minute video on the Pope in Val d'Aosta. Pope Benedict grinned throughout like a man who was forced by his grandchildren to "just act naturally while we make a home video of you". The pictures were then displayed on the back cover of last Sunday's Vatican newspaper. "Holy Father playing piano." "Holy Father picking blossom off tree." "Holy Father putting hand in water trough ..." And in every instance he was tightly buttoned up from head to toe.

Meanwhile, it is said that he's finishing a book on Jesus that he started before being elected Bishop of Rome. His image crafters have no problem with a Pope going back to his writing. But God forbid that he should ever return to wearing trousers.

Many people are fascinated by Padre Pio's bloody glove – what they believe is the "relic" of his supposed stigmata. Back in 2002, when the late Capuchin friar was canonised, the Vicariate of Rome held a special exhibit that featured the glove and several articles of his clothing, books and other memorabilia. I flatly refused to go and see it. Life went on and all was forgotten.

But then about a month ago, what should I read in the newspaper? There was to be a new display of Padre Pio relics and paraphernalia on 12-23 July at a big park outside Rome. Sure enough, the glove was to be among them. But also to be included was a bizarre letter written by Padre Pio several months before he died, in which he bequeathed to one of his confreres "the bowl that wet the lips of Jesus on Calvary".

According to the article, the exhibition's curator had discovered the letter – and hundreds of objects that belonged to the saint – among his great-grandfather's personal belongings. Great-grandpa, it turns out, was none other than the doctor that the Holy Office had sent to investigate Padre Pio's reported stigmata back in 1919.

With my curiosity slightly more piqued than four years ago, I started looking for more information and found out that there is a whole group of devotees out there who believe this "bowl" is none other than the Holy Grail. The original newspaper clipping said that "hundreds of buses were preparing to come to Rome from all parts of Italy and Europe" to see the mysterious letter, the glove and "a thousand other objects" that belonged to Padre Pio. I'm not sure whether the exhibition ever really took place, however. I could not find anything written about it anywhere.

Robert Mickens