

# THE CHURCH IN THE WORLD

## Turkey failing to protect religious minorities

Jonathan Luxmoore

THE EUROPEAN Union has accused Turkey of failing to protect religious minorities – just two weeks before an historic visit by Pope Benedict XVI to the Muslim country. “Turkey’s approach to minority rights remains unchanged,” noted a 2006 progress report published by the European Commission in Brussels. “Non-Muslim religious communities have no access to legal personality and continue to face restricted property rights. They encounter problems in the management of their foundations and in recovering property by judicial means.” Here the lack of access to “legal personality” means that the communities are not recognised as legal subjects, so they cannot act as Churches or religious organisations, but only as individuals. “Foundations” refers to the charities or other organisations they might run.

The report was published in the run-up to a December summit of the EU, which began accession talks with Turkey in October 2005. It said the Turkish Parliament had passed 148 bills to strengthen democracy and the rule of law, as well as accepting European Court judgments and ratifying international human rights instruments. However, it added that minor-



Benedict XVI greets Zeynep Ozbek, a 24-year-old Muslim from Turkey, during a general audience in St Peter's Square in early November. Photo: CNS, courtesy of *L'Osservatore Romano*

ity faiths, including Syriac Christians and Alevi Muslims, faced constant pressure, while attacks had been reported on clergy and places of worship of other religious communities.

“Although the mandatory indication of religious affiliation in some personal documents, such as ID cards, was abolished in April, such documents still include information on religion, leaving open the potential for discrimination,” the report continued. “Restrictions on the training of clergy and on foreign clergy to work in Turkey remain. Turkish legislation does not provide for private higher religious education for these communities.”

Christians have often complained of discrimination in Turkey, most of whose 67 million inhabitants are Sunni Muslims. The Islamist-led government of premier Recep Tayyip Erdogan has agreed to religious freedom as a precondition for EU admission in 2015, although the 32,000-member Catholic Church, which has vicariates in Istanbul and Anatolia and an archdiocese at Izmir, is still demanding juridical recognition.

The Pope visits Ankara, Istanbul and Ephesus from 28 November to 1 December as a guest of the Orthodox Ecumenical Patriarchate, and will hold talks with government and Muslim leaders, as well as Catholics and Jews.

The EU report said Turkey had abolished the death penalty and prohibited torture, but had made mixed progress in areas such as judicial independence and public administration, as well as in protecting freedom of expression and association, and the rights of women, children and the disabled.

It added that Patriarch Bartholomew I had not been permitted to use his title publicly, or to reopen an Orthodox seminary at Heybeliada, which was closed by the Government in 1971. The document also cited the shooting dead of an Italian priest, Fr Andrea Santoro, at Trabzon on the Black Sea in February, which was one of five violent attacks on Catholic clergy so far this year.

The report is the latest by the EU, which also criticised Turkey in November 2005 for “only very limited progress” on religious rights, and warned that non-Muslims faced “violent or threatening harassment”. Turkish MPs passed a law last weekend allowing religious minorities to own property, although this was dismissed as insufficient by the Ecumenical Patriarchate, for failing to cover the return of confiscated lands and buildings.

■ Seventy-five per cent of victims of religious persecution are Christians, the International Institute for Religious Freedom has found. Its director, Catholic theologian Thomas Schirrmacher, told the Berlin weekly *Welt am Sonntag* that of those who were murdered for their religious beliefs the percentage was even higher, 80 per cent. Christians were persecuted in Islamic theocracies and Communist countries such as China and North Korea, he said.

## ROME

## World economy must be ‘converted’, says Benedict XVI

Robert Mickens

POPE BENEDICT XVI has denounced the lopsided distribution of the earth’s resources as an “injustice” and one of the primary “structural causes” of world hunger. Speaking at last Sunday’s noontime Angelus in St Peter’s Square, he said the current system of world economics needed to be “converted” if progress was to be made in combating the “scandal of hunger”. But he said “every person and every family” could also make a real contribu-

tion to the effort “by adopting a style of life and consumption that is compatible with the safeguarding of creation”.

The Pope made his remarks as Italy marked its national Day of Thanksgiving, saying the goods of the earth were destined “for the entire human family”. Citing statistics from the UN Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO), he said it was a “sore point” that more than 800 million people were affected by the “drama of hunger”. “Too many persons, especially children, die of famine,”

the Pope said. He then pointed out that the Thanksgiving commemoration was not only an opportunity to thank God for “the fruits of agriculture labour”, but it was also meant “to encourage us to make a concrete commitment to defeating the scourge of hunger”.

At a recent “special event” at the Rome-based FAO on the right to food, the head of the Vatican’s Justice and Peace office, Cardinal Renato Martino, said that the right to have enough food is “fundamental and inalienable

for every person and their family”. The cardinal said in order to achieve “food security” for all people there was a need for “true agrarian reform”, which would include “a more equitable distribution of land”. He said, “In this regard, the right of women to have access to land must also be strongly affirmed.” Cardinal Martino listed several church-sponsored initiatives in “the fight against hunger”. He also stressed that peace is a “prior and fundamental condition” for achieving “sustainable agriculture”.

## SWITZERLAND

# Pope alarmed by level of religious ignorance

Robert Mickens

*In Rome*

IN A SERIES of recent encounters with bishops from Germany and Switzerland, Pope Benedict pointed out that the Church in both countries was facing a “common difficult situation caused by secularism” – namely, that among the last two generations of Catholics religious ignorance had reached an “alarming” level. He said the bishops had to “reflect seriously” on how to provide sounder education in helping people know and believe the fullness of Catholic faith.

“The Church in Germany must above all make newly visible the force and beauty of the Catholic faith,” he said during an ad limina audience on 10 November with bishops from his homeland. Speaking in his native tongue, the 79-year-old Pope said secularisation had made believing “increasingly difficult”, but he said it was also a “providential challenge” that the Church had to face “with courage”. He said this required that Catholics had a solid knowledge of their faith. Hence he urged the bishops to be more vigilant about the curriculum of religious studies and seminary pro-

grammes so that they taught “the Deposit of the Faith, as presented by the Magisterium of the Church”. The Pope said that because of the general loss of traditional Catholic formation in many families, it was urgently necessary to put young men interested in priesthood through an “introductory year” before admitting them to seminary.

Pope Benedict touched on similar topics in three different talks to Swiss bishops who were in Rome on 7-9 November to conclude a 2005 ad limina visit that was truncated by the illness and eventual death of Pope John Paul II. Benedict XVI addressed the bishops twice on their first day – during a homily at Mass and just before they met Vatican officials – and then at the conclusion of their meetings.

Though the Pope did not partake in any of the talks, he touched on the themes of the meetings. He said faith in God must appear in “a completely new way in all our thoughts and actions”. But he indicated that this would be a return to traditional practices of the Church – for example, the distinction between the priest’s and laity’s role at Mass and a need to return to the Sacrament of Penance.

## GERMANY

# Differences over old rite ‘hurting Church’

Christa Pongratz-Lippitt

*In Vienna*

THE THORNY question of whether to allow priests to celebrate the Tridentine Mass is threatening the Church and its unity, the president of the German bishops’ conference, Cardinal Karl Lehmann, told Vatican Radio while in Rome during the German bishops’ ad limina visit. Asked whether the issue could split the Church, Cardinal Lehmann said, “That has already happened.”

“There is no point in speculating as to what will happen if ...” the cardinal emphasised. It depended very much on the motives of those in favour of a return to the old rite, and there were obviously many motives at play here, he said. “In my experience, only very few people are really concerned about the aestheticism of the liturgy. Here and there, there is understandable regret that a beautiful prayer has been abandoned, but although people usually deny it, this is in reality a dogmatic issue. Those

who favour a return to the old Mass more or less clearly question the validity of the new Mass.”

The cardinal also said that some of the calls for the old rite appeared bogus. On careful analysis, the lists of signatures in favour of a return that he had received, for example, showed that they had often been signed by very elderly people and by many children, that two-thirds of the signatures came from outside his diocese, and that people often signed several times.

He said that a thorough analysis was imperative before further facilitating celebration of the Mass in the old, Tridentine rite. It was imperative to get together with its supporters and discuss the issue, Cardinal Lehmann underlined. He had found that they usually soon realised that it was quite sufficient if Mass in the old rite was celebrated occasionally. There were, moreover, hardly any priests left who were able and willing to celebrate the Tridentine Mass, he added.

## FRANCE

# Cardinal warns against pick-and-mix approach to liturgy

Philip Crispin

CARDINAL JEAN-PIERRE Ricard has warned against “the temptation of an à la carte religion”. Speaking last week at the close of the autumn session of the French bishops’ conference, of which he is president, the Archbishop of Bordeaux said: “Diversity is possible. But this must be regulated. A Church in which everyone built their own chapel, according to their personal taste, sensibility, choice of liturgy and political opinions would no longer be the Church of Christ.”

His comments came following a public letter of support from his 110 brother bishops over the issue of reconciliation with traditionalist followers of the pre-Vatican II Tridentine-rite Latin mass. The French Church has been in turmoil since the creation of a traditionalist pontifical institute in Bordeaux in September and reports from Rome last month that the Pope will allow wider use of the Tridentine rite (see *The Tablet*, 28 October 2006).

“The teaching of the [Second Vatican] Council remains the ‘compass’ which guides our steps,” said Cardinal Ricard, while adding: “As bishops we are ready to look to, alongside the Holy Father and under his authority, the unity and communion of our local churches and between our churches.”

A member of the Vatican commission *Ecclesia Dei*, which seeks to maintain full communion with traditionalists, the cardinal is due in Rome for discussions about Benedict XVI’s personal proposals for liturgical reform.

“This message”, said Cardinal Ricard of the bishops’ letter, “gives me substance upon which I can ponder and position myself concerning the text which is to be proposed.”

While affirming their communion with the Pope and the spirit of the Second Vatican Council, the bishops also confirmed their desire to welcome estranged traditionalists and their attachment to the Council’s liturgical renewal. However, they set two conditions for reconciliation: that those separated from the Church make “an unequivocal gesture of consent” to the Magisterium of the Church, and that the resolution of the liturgical question be made in “truth” without being separated from the rest of the Church’s teachings.

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## UNITED STATES

# Nuncio tells bishops to be teachers, not watchdogs

**Rocco Palmo**

*In Baltimore*

AS THE papal representative to the United States urged a less "adversarial" role in the nation's hierarchy, the American bishops approved an ambitious set of statements during a plenary meeting this week at which they planned to lower the profile of the conference itself.

In a cost-saving move, this year's "November Meeting" of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) moved from its traditional site of Washington's Capitol Hill to Baltimore, US Catholicism's historic seat, where it will remain until at least 2010. Even before settling into its agenda, the meeting was greeted with complaints from some supporters of organised labour within the Church, who protested over the conference's selection of a non-union hotel to host the Church's landmark gathering.

The almost 300 bishops attending dealt with the controversial topics of homosexuals in the Church and reception of the Eucharist, but the statements seemed to be a "last hurrah", as a streamlining of the USCCB's apparatus approved at the meeting indicated a turn towards a less significant public role for the conference. There will be fewer committees and less travel for its employees and officials.

In a debate that aroused bouts of exasperated laughter from the bishops, an initiative on ministerial outreach to "persons with a homosexual inclination" developed into a heated series of exchanges between prelates on either side of the debate on how the Church should engage with gay and lesbian Catholics. Archbishop Raymond Burke of St Louis argued forcefully for an endorsement of "Courage" – a group that calls its members to chastity, moving "beyond the confines of the homosexual identity to a more complete

one in Christ", according to its mission statement. The bishops finally consented to a mention of Courage in a footnote to the final text.

The bishops also took sides on a document on the worthy reception of the Eucharist, with several of them keen to specifically mention dissident politicians among Catholics who, "in [their] personal or professional [lives] were knowingly and obstinately to reject the defined doctrines of the Church" and should be precluded from the Sacrament. While that amendment was also turned back before the document's approval, Bishop Arthur Serratelli of Paterson, chairman of the Doctrine Committee, told reporters that "anyone who is publicly in defiance of Church teaching ... becomes a cause of scandal" when they continue to receive Holy Communion. The conference intends an abbreviated version of the statement to be printed in parish bulletins.

On the meeting's opening day, Archbishop Pietro Sambi, the apostolic nuncio in the United States, said that he found "the bishops and the faithful of the Church in the United States ... thirsting to muster again the courage to experience [the] Wisdom of God" after the debilitating abuse scandals of the last five years. Exhorting them to embrace the mass media as a tool of evangelisation, Archbishop Sambi advised against bishops acting as adversarial "watchdogs of the faith", saying that their optimal task was "something much more difficult": the "munus docendi", or teaching role, of the office.

In his presidential address, USCCB's president, Bishop William Skylstad of Spokane, said that he was "frequently appalled by the coarseness that seems to be a growing phenomenon" in the American polity. Extending his plea for civility to discussions within the Church, he said that "there is a difference between spirited debate and debasing personal attacks".

## Voters back stem-cell research

FOLLOWING a divisive midterm elections campaign Missouri voters narrowly passed a proposal last week that will protect any form of stem-cell research allowed under federal law, despite intense opposition by the state's Catholic bishops and many others in what was by far the most expensive ballot measure in the state's history, *writes Tim Lavin*.

Opponents had argued that the proposal, called Amendment 2, would allow the destruction of human life and could open the door for human cloning. "Amendment 2 will come to be regarded as the bellwether of human cloning," said Raymond L. Burke, the Archbishop of St Louis, after the amendment

was passed. "It will further erode respect for all human life and for procreation as the way new human life is to come into the world."

Bishop Robert Morlino, of Madison, Wisconsin, got what he wanted when the state passed an amendment banning same-sex marriage. Bishop Morlino had instructed his priests to play a 14-minute recording at all Masses on the Sunday before Election Day of a homily he delivered denouncing gay marriage. In the recording, Bishop Morlino argued that no one had a right to redefine marriage and that "if we admit that there is such a right, that causes the collapse of the family and that causes the collapse of society, in due time".

## PAKISTAN

# Catholic freed after eight years in solitary

A 58-YEAR-OLD Catholic man from Lahore was due to be released from prison this week after spending eight and a half years in solitary confinement on unsubstantiated blasphemy charges, *writes Ellen Teague.*

Ranjha Masih was detained in 1998 for allegedly damaging a neon sign containing verses from the Qur'an. The alleged incident happened during a demonstration following the funeral of the Catholic Bishop of Faisalabad, John Joseph, who had committed suicide to protest against the country's blasphemy laws. After being held for five years without bail, Mr Masih was sentenced to life in prison in 2003. He was acquitted last week by the Lahore High Court, after the presiding judge ruled that the lack of any solid evidence against Mr Masih required him to issue a complete acquittal. Mr Masih has always protested his innocence.

According to the Lahore-based Centre for Legal Aid Assistance and Settlement, the former hospital worker was to be transferred for his safety to a secure, undisclosed location after his release. He has already received death threats. At least 23 people involved in blasphemy cases – a quarter of them Christian – have been murdered in Pakistan in recent years, according to the National Commission for Justice and Peace. Mr Masih, a married man with six children and several grandchildren, was a friend of Bishop John Joseph.

## IRAQ

# Christians criticise US ghetto plan

A SUGGESTION by the United States Catholic Bishops' Conference that a safe haven for Iraqi Christians could be created in the country's Plain of Nineveh has been rejected by an Iraqi archbishop. Archbishop Louis Sako of Kirkuk said he felt the plan "could create much more tension than relief for Christians", *writes Ellen Teague.*

In an interview with Aid to the Church in Need, published last week on the organisation's website, Archbishop Sako pointed to the centuries of coexistence and cooperation between Christian communities and the prevailing Islamic culture. "We are Christians," he said, "but we are also citizens like everyone else."

Archbishop Sako is calling for a meeting of Iraq's Christian leaders to draw up a "common line" about problems facing the country's Christian community and to unite demands for political and civil rights.

Meanwhile intimidation of Christians continues. The entrance of a Catholic church in Mosul was bombed early this month, destroying doors and windows.

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## RUSSIA

# Patriarch positive over papal meeting

Josef Pazderka

FOR THE first time in recent years Moscow Patriarch Alexis II did not publicly rule out a meeting with the Pope in near future. "The possibility of a personal meeting with the Pope has never been excluded. We have always insisted that such a meeting should open a new page in our relations and not be just a protocol meeting before TV cameras," the patriarch said in an interview with *Paris Match*, adding that any meeting would take place "probably in a third country". Alexis II also said that the number of Russian Orthodox churches in Russia had risen fourfold in 20 years, from 6,800 to 27,000, and the number of monasteries had leapt from 18 to 680.

The head of Russian Catholics, Archbishop Tadeusz Kondrusiewicz, met Metropolitan Kirill, head of the Moscow Patriarchate Department for External Church Relations, for the first time in several years. Patriarchate spokesman Fr Igor Vyzhanov described the meeting as "honest and open", adding that the Russian Catholic Church would inform the Patriarchate about its activities, especially when it decided to open a new parish, "to avoid suspicions and misunderstandings".

## UKRAINE

# Beatification starts for Dominican martyrs

UKRAINE'S CATHOLIC Church has launched beatification proceedings for a group of Dominicans shot by the Soviet NKVD paramilitary police in 1941 after the outbreak of war with Germany, writes *Jonathan Luxmoore*.

"This is the Lviv archdiocese's first process involving Second World War martyrs," explained Bishop Marian Buczek, secretary-general of Ukraine's Latin Catholic Bishops' Conference. "Their memory is still fresh among [the] older generation here, so we need to begin work as soon as possible in order to meet witnesses who recall these murders."

Poland's Catholic information agency said that the diocesan process for Fr Justyn Spyrlak, a Dominican superior, and his seven companions would formally begin tomorrow with a Mass in Lviv cathedral. It added that four of the monks, aged 31 to 84, had been murdered in their monastery at Czortov, near Tarnopol, while the remaining four, including Fr Spyrlak himself, had been shot through the head at the nearby River Seret.

The process for the Dominicans follows the beatification of 32 Communist-era martyrs from the larger Greek or Eastern Catholic Church during a Ukrainian pilgrimage by Pope John Paul II in June 2001.

## ROME

# Pope calls emergency meeting on married priests

Robert Mickens

POPE BENEDICT XVI this week gathered the Vatican's highest-ranking officials for what was apparently an emergency meeting over an excommunicated archbishop's push to reinstate the world's some 150,000 married priests.

As *The Tablet* went to press there were few details surrounding the session on Thursday between the Pope and the heads of Roman Curia offices. On Monday, the Holy See press office said that Benedict XVI had called the meeting to "examine the situation that has developed following the disobedience of Msgr Emmanuel Milingo".

Archbishop Milingo, 76, who lived in the Vatican for more than two decades, incurred automatic excommunication on 26 September after he ordained four married men to the rank of bishop. They are all members of the "Married Priests Now! Prelature" that the Zambian archbishop founded in July. A former Archbishop of Lusaka, Msgr Milingo was briefly alienated from the Catholic Church in 2001 when he married a Korean woman dur-

ing a mass wedding ceremony in Sun Myung Moon's Unification Church. He later returned, repentant, until leaving again this summer, and going back to his wife.

In an open letter to the Pope on 4 November Archbishop Milingo wrote: "The Married Priests Now! Prelature with its archbishops, bishops and priests considers itself to be a Roman Catholic Personal Prelature in Communion with your Holiness and is part of the Roman Catholic Church ... We are mature adults, not children, so threats, penalties and punishments are out of place in our conversation and will not work. What will work is an honest discussion about the married priesthood of the New Testament and of the primitive Church." The archbishop noted that Catholics were already using married priests for weddings, baptisms and funerals. "It is time to free the priesthood from the obligation of celibacy," he said in the letter.

The Vatican press office said the Pope and Roman Curia officials were to "carry out a reflection on requests for dispensation from the obligation of celibacy".

## AUSTRALIA

# Attack launched on 'unaccountable' bishops

A MELBOURNE parish priest has criticised changes at his diocesan Catholic Education Office as reflecting a culture in which bishops are not answerable for their decisions, *writes Mark Brolly*.

Fr Eric Hodgens, parish priest of St Bede in North Balwyn and a former director of pastoral formation of clergy in Melbourne, said that, in less than a year, "diocesan bad management, non-consultative planning, lack of communications and half-truth publicity have come together to leave a Catholic Education Office which has lost its key visionaries and is confused and demoralised".

He said the office, which is responsible for the fourth-largest education system in Australia after the New South Wales, Victoria and Queensland state systems, was without any priest for the first time in its history. Fr Hodgens wrote on the Australian website *Online Catholics* last week: "Catholic bishops have been brought up in a culture that insists that they are boss and do not have to answer to anyone. Some bishops resent being questioned and are reluctant to have open discussion. They have not learned that the world at large now expects open debate, transparency and accountability. The bishop whose deliberation and decision is questioned is angry and affronted. Those affected by his decision feel angry and abused."

"Three key educational leaders have been neutralised without any consultation," Fr Hodgens wrote.

## ZIMBABWE

# Leaking of church plan angers archbishop

A PIONEERING document that was to have spelled a new era in more outspoken lobbying of Robert Mugabe's dictatorship by Zimbabwe's Churches had been tampered with, leaving it as "soft as decaffeinated tea", Pius Ncube, Archbishop of Bulawayo has said, *writes Abigail Frymann*.

Speaking on Zimbabwe's SW Radio Africa on Monday he said he suspected that the document, "The Zimbabwe We Want", had been leaked to the Government ahead of publication. "It's not the original document that we agreed upon as Churches. I think someone – among the three bodies from the Evangelical Fellowship of Zimbabwe, the Zimbabwe

Council of Churches and the Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops' Conference – leaked it to the Government." The archbishop said critical areas had been toned down and several pages taken out that had been signed by the country's three main Churches. A paragraph on the lack of free media had been replaced by a sentence saying the media was polarised and not working for national unity, he said.

"This Government has done enough harm, enough bullying. They are causing suffering and now they must come over and bully us, the Churches. That was supposed to be our document, not their document. I am pretty angry about this," said the archbishop.

## RWANDA

# Nun found guilty of complicity in genocide

A CATHOLIC nun has been sentenced to 30 years in jail for helping militia kill hundreds of people hiding in a hospital where she worked during Rwanda's 1994 genocide, *writes Ellen Teague*.

The nun, Theophister Mukakibibi, was sentenced on 9 November by a traditional Gacaca court – a system of community justice – for helping Hutu militiamen kill ethnic Tutsis seeking refuge at the National University

Hospital in Butare. "She was responsible for selecting Tutsis and would throw them out of the hospital, and the militia would then kill them," said Jean Baptiste Ndahumba, president of the Gacaca court in Butare. At least 100,000 people were murdered in the south-eastern prefecture of Butare, while 800,000 Tutsis and moderate Hutus were killed nationwide by militia orchestrated by the extremist Hutu government then in power.

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## IN BRIEF

### Court to examine abortion ban

The United States Supreme Court heard the opening arguments last week of a case dealing with the controversial procedure known as partial birth abortion. The Bush administration contends that the operation, in which doctors partially remove a foetus from the uterus before crushing or cutting its skull, is tantamount to infanticide. The court is to decide whether Congress violated the law when it declared the procedure illegal in 2003.

### Gay inheritance law passed

Mexico City's legislative assembly has passed a law extending property and pension inheritance rights to same-sex couples, despite opposition from the Church and the National Action Party. The measure, which applies only in the capital, recognises civil unions of gay couples, but not same-sex marriages or gay adoption.

### Pinochet immunity lifted

A Chilean appeals court last week lifted the immunity from prosecution enjoyed by former President Augusto Pinochet, so that he can face charges arising from the kidnapping and disappearance of a Spanish priest, Fr Antonio Llido, in 1974.

### Pope brings forward Brazil visit

Pope Benedict XVI has brought forward the date of his trip to Brazil next year from 31 to 9 May, in order to visit São Paulo and attend the opening on 13 May – the feast of the Virgin of Fatima – of the fifth Latin American Bishops' Conference, taking place on 13–31 May at the Marian shrine of Aparecida in São Paulo state.

### Red tape costs Thai lives

Many of Thailand's 16,000 children who are HIV-positive are being denied free treatment because of government red tape. Fr Lawrence Patin, director of the Pattaya Orphanage Trust in Thailand, told *The Tablet*: "Your [healthcare] card is only valid where you've got your house registration. If a patient comes to [the orphanage] to get the medicine, he has to go back to [where he is from] – it's complicated."

### Stem-cell research fight not over

The Australian Senate's narrow approval of legislation allowing embryonic cloning for stem-cell research is not the end of the struggle to ban such practices, according to the Archbishop of Hobart, Adrian Doyle. He was speaking after the Senate's 34–32 vote.

### Bishop assaults congregation

Police in Moldova have closed a Russian Orthodox church after the local bishop, Petr Mustiata, assaulted the congregation which voted last month to transfer allegiance to the Metropolitanate of Bessarabia in neighbouring Romania.

## Letter from Rome

More on the Pope's mystery speech that was never given to the Swiss bishops: last week I said that the Vatican press office released – then withdrew – a text attributed to Pope Benedict that had evidently been gathering dust in a drawer from the last months of John Paul II's pontificate.

The press office initially said that the current Pope had given the harsh-toned message to the bishops who were in Rome on 7–9 November to conclude their ad limina visit that was truncated in 2005. After the text was withdrawn the Vatican then published the transcripts of three other off-the-cuff talks the Pope gave to the prelates instead. The odd thing was that two of the talks touched on almost exactly the same issues as the speech had. The progressive Catholic news weekly, *Adista*, this week raised the hypothesis that the Pope had actually given the original speech to the Swiss bishops. But after the prelates read the harsh text criticising many church practices in their country, they "politely, but firmly, protested". To support the claim, the paper noted that later, when the Pope spoke spontaneously to the bishops, he apologised for not having time to prepare a proper, written text. *Adista* said this was not credible, because it would be the only case in which an episcopal conference had not received a prepared message for an ad limina visit. The progressive paper said that there were other proofs that the withdrawn speech was actually Pope Benedict's. Most specifically, it noted that the message makes reference to events that took place after the death of Papa Wojtyła. A monsignor in the Secretariat of State had another theory. He told me it was Pope Benedict who torpedoed the original speech because he didn't like its harsh tone.

Irreverence has been a characteristic of the Romans ever since the Eternal City's founders – Romulus and Remus – were suckled by the legendary she-wolf eight centuries before Christ was born. Even many Romans who became bishops and popes down the ages proved they were not immune to this well-known and somewhat crusty old trait. So it is not surprising that Italian radio and television is peppered with all sorts of satirical programmes that take the mickey out of just about everyone – the Pope included. Evidently, the Catholic daily newspaper, *L'Avvenire*, believes that it is time to "cut the nonsense". In two recent editorials it blasted a television show and a popular radio programme for their parodies of Pope Benedict XVI and his personal secretary, Msgr Georg Gänswein. The TV show, on one of the private stations, depicts the Bavarian Pope as meek and

humble in public, but an almost frenzied tyrant when in private. The radio programme, instead, does a weekly spoof of his secretary. Italy's best-known impersonator – Fiorello – hosts the show on RAI state radio, and recently he imitated the Bavarian monsignor as saying, "The Holy Father has begun smoking three packs of cigarettes a day, like a Turk, to prepare for his visit to Turkey." *L'Avvenire* was not laughing. And, even though he's admitted to never having seen or heard the send-ups, Msgr Gänswein told an Italian news agency this week that the broadcasts should be stopped immediately. Not everyone agrees, however. Fausto Colombo, who teaches media theory at the Catholic University in Rome, said that putting limits on satire would destroy the genre altogether. He said: "Making fun of the Pope's secretary is not the same as making fun of Jesus – or is it?"

A n official at the headquarters of one of the large male religious orders here in town recently told me that I tend to portray Rome in an overly rosy manner. I was a bit taken aback, since I find it a constant challenge not to be too critical of the woes afflicting the Eternal City. I protested: "But I'm always complaining about the traffic and the graffiti ..." He cut me off. "I know," he said, "but you still paint a romantic picture of the place." Well, that really surprised me. So I prodded this priest a bit and discovered why he was so "down" on Rome at that moment.

It turned out that at least two of his confrères had recently been mugged and robbed right outside their general curia's back door – and it was in broad daylight! Both had been returning home from the nearby Stazione Termini, Rome's main railway station. And, naturally, both were laden with luggage. Just after the priest told me this story, newspapers reported that three rapes had taken place in the city in just one week. "What in the world is going on here?" I thought. Rome is filthy and it is traffic congested. The taxi drivers will drive you mad, if you can ever find one to drive you anywhere! There are also lots of beggars on the street corners and gypsy children who will steal you blind – if shop owners don't first. And there are so many other irritating and ugly aspects of the place. But violent crime? This has never been part of life in what is one of the world's most beautiful cities. How much longer can the Roman sunshine, famous cuisine, and age-old architectural beauty be taken as acceptable compensation for all such ills?

Robert Mickens