

SCANDALS IN THE CHURCH: In Rome and Boston

REPORTER'S NOTEBOOK

In Rome, Eyebrows Rise Without a Firestorm

By DANIEL J. WAKIN

ROME, April 23 — As American television networks were flying in equipment and correspondents, men from a Bavarian fraternal order dressed in lederhosen and peaked Alpine caps carried 20-foot flags down the aisles of one of Rome's most ancient churches, Santa Maria in Trastevere.

They were there last weekend to take part in a Mass in honor of the 75th birthday of Cardinal Josef Ratzinger of Germany, a ritual in a city that now finds itself the site of a very contemporary event, an emergency meeting of American cardinals at the Vatican to confront the sexual abuse of minors by priests.

For all the urgency felt in the parishes of Boston, New York and elsewhere in the United States, Rome has shown itself to be more blasé.

Maybe this city has seen too much history, too much church influence, too much anticlericalism to care much.

Italy, after all, is a country where crucifixes are found on courtroom walls yet where a twisty kind of pasta dish called priest choker, or strozzapreti, is on menus.

Also, until Tuesday's papal pronouncement, the press had given the event modest coverage. The news has been dominated by stories like the French election and speculation on what caused a small plane to crash into Milan's tallest building.

Giovanni Gallini, 33, who runs a newsstand across the Tiber River on Corso Vittorio Emanuele, the avenue that leads to the Vatican, said he had a vague idea about what was going on the other side of the river.

"They are coming to talk, the cardinals?" Mr. Gallini said. "About what?"

He segued quickly into a critique. "The church is 2,000 years, and it has always made us believe things which are not true. Its manipulation of history is well-known," he said. His girlfriend, Roberta Cottone, also took the

long view, saying: "The pedophilia of priests has existed for centuries. They are just better at covering it up here."

From Reticent to Talkative

The word "extraordinary" was used often when his week's meeting between Vatican officials and American cardinals was announced. On the summit's first day, there certainly were some striking moments.

Cardinals, normally deeply respectful of one another's independence and prerogatives, rarely reveal their private conversations. But today, it seemed, cardinals were giving interviews left and right, describing the talks with their fellow prelates.

For example, here was Cardinal Francis E. George of Chicago addressing an auditorium full of reporters, describing what Cardinal Bernard F. Law of Boston said at a preliminary gathering of the Americans on Monday night.

"He started out saying that in a sense if he had not made some terrible mistakes, we probably would not be here, and he apologized for that," Cardinal George said. "He's facing it very clearly. He didn't speak about a possible resignation and was not asked about that."

Two Remain Light-Lipped

The cardinal's meeting sometimes had the whiff of a political convention. There were sound trucks and boom mikes, sound bites and spin.

The cardinals were talking freely with reporters, which is not surprising, given the criticism that American church leaders have hidden the problem to avoid scandal.

Bishop Wilton Gregory of Belleville, Ill., the president of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, stressed the bishops' commitment to openness during the meeting.

"I spoke honestly and openly about



David L. Ryan/The Boston Globe

Cardinal Francis E. George of Chicago, left, and Bishop Wilton Gregory of Belleville, Ill., talked during a news conference yesterday at the Vatican.

the need to be transparent in our handling of these cases," Bishop Gregory said he told Pope John Paul II.

One of the most talkative cardinals has been Theodore E. McCarrick of Washington. He and other cardinals have gone on a charm offensive with the news media. On Tuesday, Cardinal George called news coverage of the scandal a "moment of grace" because it exposed wrongdoing.

Two cardinals have declined all interview requests and made no public appearances. They are Cardinal Law and Cardinal Edward M. Egan of New York, who has faced criticism for his handling of pedophile priests while bishop of Bridgeport, Conn.

Anguish and Perspective

Some people in Rome have a foot in two worlds. They are the seminarians at the North American College, where a number of the American

cardinals are staying.

Timothy McMorland, 30, of Washington, is a deacon and will be ordained on May 25.

Mr. McMorland said that when he first heard reports about John J. Geoghan, the former Boston priest whose molestation of young boys sparked the scandal, he thought it was an isolated case. Then word about the scandal entered the seminary walls through newscasts from the United States and Internet sites.

"I was totally outraged," he said. But living in Rome, at the center of Catholicism, gave him perspective, he said.

"This does not represent the church as a whole. The church is filled with sinners, and if you look around you, you see that," he said. "We live in the midst of stories of saints and sinners here, of popes great and infamous. And yet the church has survived."