

Pope: Church Must Stand Firm Against 'Intolerant Agnosticism'

Pope Benedict said on Sunday that Roman Catholic leaders must have the courage to stand up to attacks by "intolerant agnosticism" prevalent in many countries.

The pope and the Church have come under increased attack because of their opposition to **homosexual marriage** and women priests. The pope has repeatedly denounced what he says are attempts to push religion out of public debate.

The 85-year-old pontiff celebrated Mass on the day Christians in the West mark the Epiphany, and ordained four new archbishops including his personal secretary.

In a homily to about 10,000 people in St Peter's Basilica in Vatican City, he firmly rejected suggestions the Church should change to suit public opinion.

"Anyone who lives and proclaims the faith of the Church is on many points out of step with the prevalent way of thinking," he said. "The approval of the prevailing wisdom, however, is not the criterion to which we submit."

In the United States, a group last month started a petition on the White House website asking the administration of President Barack Obama to list the Catholic Church as a "hate group" because of its opposition to gay marriage.

"Today's regnant agnosticism has its own dogmas and is extremely intolerant regarding anything that would question it and the criteria it employs," the pope said.

"Therefore the courage to contradict the prevailing mindset is particularly urgent for a bishop today. He must be

courageous," he said.

Monti at Mass

The pope ordained the new archbishops in a ceremony attended by Italian Prime Minister Mario Monti, placing his hands on the heads of the four men and anointing them with holy oil to symbolise the transmission of episcopal authority.

The best known of the four new archbishops is the pontiff's chief private secretary Monsignor Georg Ganswein, who has been the closest person to Benedict since his election in 2005 as leader of the world's 1.2 billion Roman Catholics.

Last month Ganswein, 56, a German like the pope, was promoted to the job of Prefect of the Pontifical Household, a position that will significantly increase his power as the pope gets older and frailer.

As prefect, Ganswein, 56—already one of the most recognisable and powerful figures in the papal court—will arrange all the pope's private and public audiences and his daily schedule.

And because he is expected to keep his job as chief private secretary, he will have even more power in deciding who has access to the pope.

Ganswein was the immediate superior of Paolo Gabriele, the former papal butler who was convicted of stealing sensitive papal documents and leaking them to the media.

The secretary was the person who confronted Gabriele about papers that had gone missing. Gabriele was pardoned by the pope last month after being sentenced to 18 months in jail for aggravated theft.

Because of the leaks scandal, Ganswein is expected to further tighten his control over Vatican personnel who have a direct connection to the papal apartments.

The other new archbishops are Angelo Vincenzo Zani, an Italian in the Vatican's department for Catholic education, Fortunatus Nwachukwu, a Nigerian who becomes the Vatican's ambassador to Nicaragua, and Nicolas Thevenin, a Frenchman who becomes ambassador to Guatemala.

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