

# Vatican Takes Over Italy Benedictine Monasteries

Vatican City (RNS) — In an unprecedented action, the Vatican Congregation for Religious and Secular Institutes dissolved the autonomous administrations of Italy's 10 Cassinese Benedictine monasteries and set up a temporary governing body for the houses.

The Vatican press spokesman, Federico Alessandrini, said the action affected some 200 Italian Benedictine monks and was taken by the Congregation for Religious following what was described as "apostolic visitations."

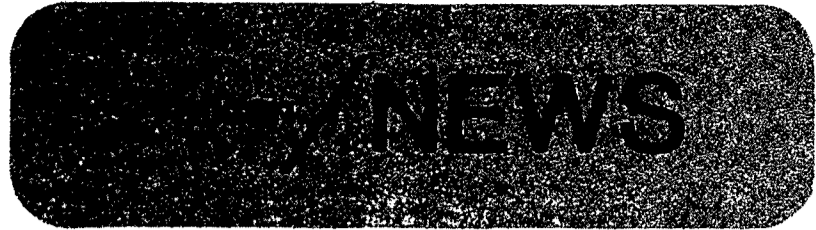
Such a visit to the famed Benedictine monastery at Monte Cassino — one of the 10 houses of the Cassinese congregation — was depicted by a Vatican source as tantamount to an official inspection.

Placed in temporary control of the monasteries was a commission made up of religious from various sections of the country. The commission is expected to govern the monasteries until a replacement group is selected next Spring.

Contacted at St. Mary's Abbey, Morristown, N.J., Abbot Martin Burne, abbot president of the American Cassinese Federation of the Benedictine order, told Religious News Service that in his opinion the action by the Vatican congregation was "unique."

The abbot-president, who presides over 22 autonomous monasteries in the U.S., said he was at a loss to explain why the administrations of the Italian Monasteries were dissolved. He noted that each of the 10 houses is autonomous and headed by an abbot.

"If I were told that the Vatican was taking over the 22 houses in the American federation," he observed, "I'd probably fall into



a state of shock."

Abbot Burne's counterpart in Italy, the president of the Italian Cassinese federation, is Abbot Alberto Clerici, of St. Peter's Abbey in Modena. The abbot-primate of the world Benedictine order is an American, Abbot Rembert Weakland, formerly of St. Vincent Archabbey, Latrobe, Pa.

Earlier this year, speculation grew in Rome that the Congregation for Religious headed by Cardinal Ildebrando Antonutti, would act to oust the controversial Abbot Giovanni Franzoni of St. Paul's Outside-the-Walls Abbey, one of the 10 abbeys now taken over by the Vatican congregation.

Abbot Franzoni, a youngish man who has repeatedly shunned the trappings of his office in dress and manner, has been a center of controversy since his election in 1964.

Some of Abbot Franzoni's colleagues have long contended that his monastic life is exemplary and that the Vatican wanted to oust him only because his liberal stands on social problems have become an embarrassment to the Vatican.

Last March, a group of the abbot's supporters marched in a candlelight procession to St. Peter's Basilica to protest rumored moves by the congregation to remove him from office.

Alessandrini, during the news conference announcing the dissolution of the administrations of the 10 monasteries, admitted the actions of Abbot Franzoni "might have had something to do with it."

"But I personally don't think so," he added. "You must remember that we are speaking of 200 Italian Benedictines and not of a single man."

Abbot Franzoni, who is also procurator general of the Cassinese federation in Italy, has spoken out continually in favor of conscientious objection, against the Vietnam war, and has sponsored "beat music" Masses. The Vatican and conservative members of the Benedictines in Italy have objected strenuously not only to these actions of the abbot but to his practice of sending monks into slum areas to do pastoral work.

## Pope Hits

### 'Elastic' Morals

Castelgandolfo—(RNS)—Scoring the "elastic and permissive morality which unfortunately seems to prevail today," Pope Paul called for a strengthening of individual moral conscience in the lives of people everywhere.

Describing conscience as a "lamp which lights our way" when we look toward the ultimate end of life "which is God," the pontiff told a general audience here that "moral awareness" is even more necessary today because modern education enables man to make autonomous decisions in every facet of his life.

"The environment, public opinion, fashions, passionate incentives, economic interests, and countless distractions signal recourse to our own conscience," he added.

The Pope said that man needs the desire for his own perfection, that moral conscience "helps to overcome the fear that he is vile and inept, and produces the knowledge that he is a man, honest and strong."

While noting that a right, moral conscience should take "first place" in a person's life, the Pope said that the law is also necessary.

"Conscience . . . is educated, explained and integrated with the external law, both in civil and Christian orders," he said. "The Christian way would not be noticed by us with sufficient authority if it were not announced to us by the message of the Gospel."

"Those who think of freeing themselves from the laws of authority," he added, "would have a moral sense that is mute on many precepts . . . and would end up by finding themselves caught up in the elastic and permissive morality which unfortunately seems to prevail today."

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