

'People want to drive wedge between Catholics, Protestants': Harper

Prime Minister Stephen Harper meets with Pope Benedict XVI (right) on June 30, 2009 in Vatican City, Vatican. Harper would be the fifth leader of a nation to visit with the Pope after attending the G8 summit in L'Aquila.

Photograph by: Vatican Pool, Getty Images

By Peter O'Neil, Europe Correspondent, Canwest News Service July 14, 2009

Prime Minister Stephen Harper has blamed the uproar over his handling of the Holy Communion host at former governor general Romeo LeBlanc's funeral mass on people trying to cause embarrassment and create division between Catholics and Protestants.

"People who want to cause embarrassment in religion and drive a wedge between Protestants and Catholics" are driving the controversy, Harper told a Catholic news agency in an exclusive interview after his meeting Saturday with Pope Benedict.

"That's whose agenda this is and that's not the Pope's agenda."

Harper said the Holy Father didn't bring up the incident during their meeting.

Harper, whose comments were published on The Catholic Register's website Tuesday, said the pontiff "was very interested in the G8 and in the outcomes of the G8."

Harper, meeting reporters after the three-day G8 summit of major industrialized countries in central Italy Friday, angrily attacked a New Brunswick newspaper that reported that he "pocketed" the host at the funeral.

Harper called the coverage a "low point" in Canadian journalism and said he consumed the host, even though a YouTube video indicated that this didn't happen in the first few seconds after it was given to him.

The Catholic Register's report gave no indication of who Harper thought was behind the controversy and the prime minister's office did not shed any further light on the comments.

"We don't have any further comment on this matter as the Prime Minister and his office have commented quite extensively," said PMO Press Secretary Dimitri Soudas.

Soudas also reiterated there was no controversy because "the Prime Minister consumed the communion that was offered to him."

Harper, who spoke with the Holy Father for 20 minutes in French, described him as "very warm, very genial."

An evangelical Protestant, the prime minister said they shared a "more personal discussion about faith and politics and the challenges that can (be) present from time to time."

Some media reports suggested on the weekend that the visit had a political undertone, since analysts have argued that the Conservative breakthrough in 2006 was owed partly to church-going Catholics who switched from the Liberals over gay marriage.

But Harper didn't address the possible political benefit of being photographed with the Pope, and instead stressed Benedict's status as both a Christian leader and a statesman.

"While I'm not theologically a Catholic, in my judgment the Catholic Church is a critical bulwark of worldwide Christianity. The Pope is an important moral and spiritual leader generally and for Christians generally, even though I'm not a Catholic."

Harper called Vatican City a small but important state.

"It is an influential, well-connected state that is very influential in world affairs."

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