

SETTLING SCORES

Suspicion bishops' in fighting lies behind Cipriani case

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The Church in Peru is at war. The news of the existence of an accusation of sexual abuse attributed to Cardinal Juan Luis Cipriani Thorne has caused a real earthquake. Vatican correspondent Iñigo Domínguez reports that the retired archbishop of Lima is accused

of having fondled and kissed a minor (aged between 16 and 17 years old at the time) in 1983. The alleged victim, now over 50 years old, denounced the incident in a letter to the Pope in 2018, which was followed by the imposition of disciplinary measures against the cardinal after his resignation from the leadership of the archdiocese in 2019.

A fact confirmed by the Holy See's Press Office, which explained that "after accepting his resignation as Archbishop of Lima", Cipriani was sent "a penitential letter with some disciplinary measures concerning his public activity, his place of residence and the use of insignia", which he accepted and signed.

The director of the press office, Matteo Bruni, also clarified that 'although in certain cases certain authorisations have been granted to meet requests due to the cardinal's age and family situation, this order is currently still in force'. This clarification came after *El País* denounced the public awarding of a medal to the retired archbishop by the mayor of Lima, Rafael López Aliaga, on 17 January.

For his part, the Cardinal did not deny the existence of the sanctions, but denied the truth of the accusation. According to Cipriani, the facts reported by Domínguez are 'completely false'. I have not committed any crime, nor have I sexually abused anyone, not in 1983, not before, not after,' the Peruvian cardinal defended himself. Not only that: the first member of Opus Dei to enter the Sacred College recounted in the communiqué, probably with a certain degree of annoyance: 'In August 2018, I was informed that a complaint had arrived that had not been delivered to me. Subsequently, on 18 December 2019, without having been heard, without knowing more and without a trial having been opened, the Apostolic Nuncio informed me orally that the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith had imposed a series of sanctions on me, restricting my priestly ministry and requiring me to take up permanent residence outside Peru. I was also asked to remain silent, which I have done'.

But Cipriani was also keen to dot the 'i' on the prohibitions imposed by Rome, which Bruni recalled were still in force. The prelate wrote that "on 4 February 2020 I had an audience with Pope Francis and the Holy Father allowed me to resume my pastoral duties. This is evidenced by my extensive pastoral activity over the years, preaching retreats, administering the sacraments, etc.'. During these years away from Lima, I lived in Rome and devoted myself to my duties as a cardinal member of the Dicastery for the Causes of Saints until I was 80 years old, when I retired from all activity in the Roman Curia and moved to Madrid".

So no disobedience to the Holy See, as the article in *El País* suggested, somewhat

supported by the statement from the Press Office. But Cipriani did not take kindly to the leak, which could have come from the Vatican itself. It is serious," the cardinal wrote, "that some information is being published that seems to come from confidential documents of the Holy See that even I do not have in my possession," recalling that "unfortunately it is not the first time that a cardinal has been falsely accused, with stories full of scandalous details. A probable reference to the affair of which Cardinal George Pell was victim in Australia.

The *El País* scoop was also the occasion for an internal reckoning within the Peruvian episcopate. His successor in Lima, Cardinal Carlos Castillo Mattasoglio, has openly taken sides against Cipriani. A disciple of Gustavo Gutiérrez, Castillo was one of the professors dismissed from teaching theology at the Pontifical Catholic University of Peru at the behest of the then Archbishop Cipriani, who did not consider his positions orthodox enough.

After taking office in 2019, Castillo felt the need to attack his predecessor as soon as the news from *El País* came out, writing in a 'Letter to the People of Lima': 'Given that in recent months, after serious and precise investigations, there are people and institutions that refuse to acknowledge the truth of the facts and of the decisions taken by the Holy See, we invite everyone to reflect on a path of conversion, which implies the abandonment of vain justifications, the commitment and rejection of the truth, which, when humbly accepted, sets us all free'. The current archbishop then went on to praise Francis's work in dealing with abuse, thus contradicting himself: it was the Pope himself who allowed his predecessor to return to his pastoral duties.

Castillo's position seems to have all the flavour of revenge, but it did not remain isolated, as the Peruvian Episcopal Conference then felt the need to follow suit with a **statement** "acknowledging the wise decision of the Holy Father to unite justice and mercy, accepting that the Archbishop Emeritus of Lima will leave the episcopal ministry at the age of 75 and imposing certain ministerial restrictions on him".

Cipriani did not remain silent and wished to respond to these attacks by his confreres, declaring that "in both cases my reaction was one of surprise and pain at the injustice with which they take for granted unproven facts about me" and he specified, probably in response to Bruni who had pointed out his acceptance of the sanctions imposed, that he had "signed, at the same time declaring in writing that the accusation was absolutely false", also complaining that he had not been able to defend himself. The reaction of the Peruvian episcopate to the serious accusation against its most famous representative has caused confusion among the faithful.

Notably, the shocking revelation was published in *El País* just a few days after a difficult plenary meeting of the Peruvian bishops, which saw the surprise election of Monsignor Carlos García Camader, bishop of 'small' Lurín, as their new president. Camader, consecrated bishop by Cipriani and formerly his auxiliary in Lima, prevailed over Cardinal Castillo, the great favourite of the evening, who paid dearly for defending the blasphemous work *María Maricón*, which was to be hosted by "his" Pontifical Catholic University of Peru.

This pitiful affair once again calls into question the credibility of the Church and respect for the proven victims of abuse by members of the clergy. It remains to be seen whether the allegations against Cipriani will be substantiated and whether the cardinal will be given the opportunity to defend himself, as he has requested, but in the meantime the timing and manner of the news release is already causing controversy. Did the information come from the Vatican? And if so, why now?