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What Cardinal Walter Kasper said about the UK

By Tristana Moore BBC News, Berlin

Cardinal Walter Kasper pulled out of the Pope's visit to the UK after making controversial comments in a German interview.

The interview, in news magazine Focus (published on 13 September) has provoked a storm of protest in Germany and the UK.

In the double-page spread with the provocative headline "Third World country", Cardinal Kasper described how he had perceived a new "aggressive" type of atheism in Britain.

When asked why so many Britons had expressed resentment towards Pope Benedict, the cardinal replied: "England is today a secularised [literal translation">, pluralistic country.

"When you land at Heathrow Airport, you sometimes think you might have landed in a Third World country," Cardinal Kasper told Focus.

When asked if Christians were discriminated against in the UK, Cardinal Kasper replied: "Yes, an aggressive new atheism has spread in England. If, for example, you wear a cross on British Airways, you will be discriminated. But we want to display our faith in public. Anyone who knows England knows that there is a great Christian tradition there. Europe would not be Europe if it were not able to preserve this tradition."

Marriage and family

The reporter asked Cardinal Kasper why the Pope was opposed to the planned equality of treatment of homosexuals in Britain. "The question is whether we can accept partnerships of same-sex [couples">, and regarding this issue, the Church has for centuries defended the understanding of marriage and family which equates to the order of God," he replied.

The reporter then asked the cardinal: "The Pope is meeting the Queen, the formal head of the Anglicans... is the Pope intending to find a common strategy with the Queen in order to defend the [Christian"> faith in Europe?

"The Queen is not the head of Anglicans as has always been said, she is the supreme moderator," said Cardinal Kasper. "Her duties are limited to administrative matters. But the Queen is an intensely religious woman and there's no doubt that the subject of a Christian Europe, the preservation of the Christian faith in Europe, will play a role.

"The issue is also of great importance for the Archbishop of Canterbury. Theological discussions will take place with him, not with the Queen," he said.

So what is the Pope setting out to achieve in the UK? "He wants to work on the difficult dialogue with the Anglican community. He will discuss possible fields of co-operation," said the cardinal. And when asked, will women priests ever be ordained in the Catholic Church? Cardinal Kasper's response was blunt: "The decision of John Paul II was so clear-cut that I don't expect that." And not even in 100 or 200 years? "I am not a

prophet. But I don't think so," said Cardinal Kasper.

He added: "Have a look at the Protestant churches: they don't have celibacy and they have women priests. But are they doing better? The Anglican Church has also taken on formidable problems with these new developments. I wouldn't wish those problems on my church."

On the issue of the sex abuse scandals, Cardinal Kasper admits that the sex abuse scandal has severely "wounded" the Catholic Church but he claims that it is "unfair" that Pope Benedict has been the target of criticism in his native Germany.

When asked about the current crisis in faith, Cardinal Kasper gave this explanation: "There is a crisis of values and orientation in western society which has appeared again and again since the Enlightenment, and was given added impetus by the 1968 Movement. The churches, Catholic and Protestant, live in this society, and its faith is weakened."

Vatican 'on defensive'

Cardinal Kasper's controversial interview and his subsequent cancellation of his trip to the UK received widespread coverage in the German media. Many commentators claimed his remarks had overshadowed the Pope's visit and said the Vatican was forced onto the defensive.

The Süddeutsche newspaper said the cardinal's interview was a diplomatic faux-pas and pointed out that British papers were clearly "not amused." The German tabloid Bild said the cardinal's interview had provoked anger and the paper referred to the commentary in the Guardian newspaper that the cardinal's comments were "racist" and reflected the "true agenda" of the Vatican.

Meanwhile, the magazine Focus relished the fact that the interview had grabbed the headlines. In its online edition, Focus provocatively asked whether it was too embarrassing for the cardinal to accompany the Pope on his trip to Britain.

According to the Vatican, the German-born cardinal was pulling out for health reasons. But it was too late to stop the media storm. **Christian Weisner, spokesman for the Catholic reform movement, We Are Church in Germany, told the BBC Cardinal Kasper's interview was "very surprising" as the 77-year-old was "normally more diplomatic than the Pope, especially in ecumenical issues".**

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