

4-14-08 - A Time for Penance, Not Pomp

By Emmett Coyne, Washington Post

At the height of the potato famine, Queen Victoria of England made a state visit to Ireland. Facades were built in Dublin to prevent her from seeing the dire suffering of the people who lived along her route from ship to castle, where she was wined and dined. The wrenching issue of the famine was totally ignored.

As Pope Benedict XVI visits the United States, will he likewise be shielded from a scandal that has brought an unprecedented harvest of shame for the Roman church in America (and elsewhere)? I am speaking, of course, of the plague of clerical sexual abuse. Or will he deal forthrightly with the matter, as needs to be done?

In 2004 a report commissioned by Catholic bishops was released, revealing 10,667 allegations of abuse against minors and accusing 4,392 of the nearly 110,000 priests who served in U.S. dioceses and religious orders from 1950 to 2002. This does not count the victims who never came forward.

A cleric who was concerned about the problem, Father Thomas Doyle, had predicted nearly 20 years before that the sex abuse scandal was going to cost the church millions. He was conservative. More than \$1.5 billion has been paid out, with more to come. Unprecedented numbers of dioceses have declared bankruptcy.

The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life has noted that while 31 percent of Americans were raised in the Catholic faith, today only 24 percent describe themselves as Catholics. The decline in vocations to a demoralized priesthood continues.

Bishop Geoffrey Robinson of Australia, in his book, "Confronting Power and Sex in the Catholic Church," contends that the sexual abuse scandal is "one of the ugliest stories ever to emerge from the Catholic Church. It is hard to imagine a more total contradiction of everything Jesus Christ stood for, and it would be difficult to overestimate the pervasive harm it has done to the Church." His is a rare episcopal voice facing the issue publicly, probing the underlying causes.

The Roman Church is steeped in symbolism. Benedict's visit to America ought to be in purple, scarlet or black robes, penitential colors -- not triumphal white or gold.

Bishop Robinson holds that the institution's modus operandi is to manage the problem by not seriously reexamining underlying issues that contributed to its systemic presence and by only addressing it when forced to.

The pope will address the United Nations, lecturing to its members on how to run the world. He would view this as a right, as he alone of all religious leaders in the world has political status (as head of the State of Vatican City). But this further obscures his primary role as pastor. He needs to put his own house, the household of faith, in order first.

The pope's agenda, emerging in the press, reveals no meeting with victims of clerical sexual abuse. He washed the feet of 12 priests recently on Holy Thursday in the safe confines of St. Peter's. Would he replicate this act by washing the feet of victims in public? This action could give real meaning to the ceremony. Otherwise it remains just a passe symbol.

This could be Benedict's "Obama moment." After news reports on the controversial remarks of his pastor, Barack Obama went public and faced the prickly issue of racism in America, rather than spinning it away. A true leader hits head-on, rather than ducking, vexing issues.

Americans, Catholic or not, are acutely aware of the clerical sexual abuse issue. More than a leader, will the pope be a true pastor, a shepherd who will walk into the wilderness to seek the hurting members?

The response of the Amish to the murder of their schoolchildren in Lancaster, Pa., in 2006 -- immediately reaching out to the family of the killer -- demonstrated true faith.

They are not a people of many books or beautiful basilicas or pompous pageantry. But they are a Christian people who, in a terrible crisis, witnessed to the highest aspiration of the gospel.

The pope, when he was Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, was noted as the watchdog of orthodoxy, intent on sniffing out any deviation from doctrine. Few people are led to the gospel by doctrine; many are led to it by practice. To paraphrase Emerson: Your actions speak so loudly I can't hear what you're saying!

The officials who invited Queen Victoria to Ireland conspired to protect her from the sight of the ravages of famine lest she experience it and be moved to intervene. Will the pope pretend that the issue doesn't exist? Have the American bishops been co-conspirators who, unlike Bishop Robinson, ignore this great challenge to the Catholic Church in America? Will Catholics here be enablers for those who would maintain a facade of normality, keeping the victims voiceless and invisible? Is this historic moment one for pageantry or penitence?

The writer is a Roman Catholic priest.