

Pope Benedict this morning met three victims of clerical abuse after the pontiff apologised Saturday for the "shame which we have all felt".

In breaking news, the Sydney Morning Herald reports that the Pope this morning met three victims of abuse by clergy.

The Canberra Times earlier reported the Pope has left the door open for a face to face meeting with Australian victims of sexual abuse by the Catholic clergy, with victims' groups calling on him to follow up Saturday's apology with concrete action to reform the Church's complaint handling procedure.

The pontiff's spokesman, Fr Lombardi, said yesterday he would not rule out a private meeting between the Pope and sex abuse victims or their families despite the Pope's departure this morning.

He pledged to provide details of any meeting, but said: "The last word will only occur when the plane leaves, when the door closes."

Senior Vatican press members were told informally early yesterday an unscheduled, informal meeting with representatives of sex abuse victims in Sydney might be on the cards.

Earlier, the Pope apologised for the "evils" of child sexual abuse by Catholic clergy in Australia during his homily at a Mass at St Mary's Cathedral on Saturday.

He acknowledged "the shame which we have all felt" and said that, as their pastor, he shared the victims' suffering. But he said the Australian Church continued "to address effectively this serious pastoral challenge."

"Indeed, I am deeply sorry for the pain and suffering the victims have endured and I assure them that, as their pastor, I too share in their suffering," the Pope said.

"These misdeeds, which constitute so grave a betrayal of trust, deserve unequivocal condemnation. They have caused great pain and have damaged the Church's witness.

"I ask all of you to support and assist your bishops, and to work together with them in combating this evil.

"Victims should receive compassion and care, and those responsible for these evils must be brought to justice. It is an urgent priority to promote a safer and more wholesome environment, especially for young people.

"In these days marked by the celebration of World Youth Day, we are reminded of how precious a treasure has been entrusted to us in our young people, and how great a part of the Church's mission in this country has been dedicated to their education and care.

"As the Church in Australia continues, in the spirit of the gospel, to address effectively this serious pastoral challenge, I join you in praying that this time of purification will bring about healing, reconciliation and ever greater fidelity to the moral demands of the gospel," the Pope concluded.

## Reaction

Mark Sabbro, of the Child Sex Abuse Survivors' Collective, told the Canberra Times he wanted the Pope to send an apostolic envoy from the Vatican to direct Australian bishops on how to improve their processes, as he did in the case of the US.

He will seek a meeting this week with the World Youth Day coordinator Bishop Anthony Fisher to suggest some constructive ideas for reconciliation, including a memorial to victims who have died.

"We are quite ready to help make the changes that will aid reconciliation," he said. "We also would like a written apology to each of us from the Vatican, and we want some form of independent inquiry outside of the Church to review the Church's procedures ... because they are unaccountable and not transparent."

However, Peter Gogarty, another victim, said the job was half done and called for Towards Healing to be made independent of the Church and for clergy to be better educated about pedophilia and the effects of sexual abuse.

Meanwhile, the Ballarat Courier reports that victims of clerical sexual abuse have welcomed the apology made to Australian victims.

But they say the Pope's words must be backed up with "action" from the Catholic Church.

On Saturday Pope Benedict XVI said he was "deeply sorry" for the suffering endured by victims of abuse by Catholic priests and brothers in Australia.

"Indeed I am deeply sorry for the pain and suffering the victims have endured and I assure them that, as their pastor, I too share in their suffering," Pope Benedict said.

"These misdeeds, which constitute so grave a betrayal of trust, deserve unequivocal condemnation."

One victim, "David", was sexually abused by a priest while a pupil at a Ballarat Catholic primary school in the 1970s.

He said he broke down when he heard the Pope's words on Saturday.

"I cried. I just cried," David said.

"We can finally start to move on (but) it's got to be backed up with some real action."

Melbourne high school teacher Stephen Woods, who was abused by three Catholic clergy members in Ballarat, said he was "relieved" to hear the apology and said it would vindicate the "thousands" of clerical abuse victims in Australia.

But he said his "heart sank" when he heard the Pope call on Catholics to back the efforts of local bishops to address the issue.

"It's the bishops who continue to stonewall victims from obtaining proper justice in the courts.

"I would like to see the Pope instruct the bishops to say who will take responsibility in each of the orders for the civil actions when litigation is taken."

Ballarat Catholic Bishop Peter Connors said he thought the Saturday mass at St Mary's Cathedral, with all Australian bishops present, was the right place for the Pope to make the apology.