

7-19-08 - Pope apologises to child victims of sex abuse, but critics say too little too late
Roy Eccleston, Sydney, The Times (UK)

The Pope has apologised for the “evil” perpetrated on Australian child sex abuse victims by paedophile priests, admitting it had seriously damaged the church and calling for those responsible to be brought to justice.

But his comments were immediately rejected by some victims’ families and rights groups as a missed opportunity to prevent further abuse.

Benedict XVI issued the apology at a mass at St Mary’s Cathedral in Sydney on Saturday morning attended by seminarians and young priests, declaring he felt the pain of the victims.

“I would like to ? acknowledge the shame which we have all felt as a result of the sexual abuse of minors by some clergy and religious in this country,” the Pope said.

“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.

“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.”

The pontiff, in Australia for World Youth Day celebrations, said the victims needed compassion and care, while “ those responsible for these evils must be brought to justice.”

But he limited his comments to children, neglecting to apologise to adults who have been abused by priests. Nor did he say that victims needed financial compensation for the abuse.

Despite strong criticism by victims of the way the Australian Catholic church is handling abuse claims, the Pope spoke approvingly of its actions saying it continued “to address effectively this serious pastoral challenge”.

Critics claim there is contrary evidence, including comments this week by Bishop Anthony Fisher who described the anger by one family over the rape of two of their daughters by a priest as “crankily dwelling on old wounds”.

Anthony and Christine Foster’s elder daughter Emma, raped as a child, committed suicide at age 26 this year. Katie, also raped, had developed a drinking problem and was hit by a car as a teenager, and now requires constant care.

Mr Foster rejected the Pope’s apology as a missed opportunity. “It hasn’t changed the situation,” he told The Times. “He should have taken charge of provision of practical help to the victims, rather than leaving it to the archbishops.

“It’s an apology, it might do some people some good but in the longer term it will not help with their lives. They need the practical psychological and emotional help. And they need to know this is really heartfelt. The victims need to know the church wants their forgiveness. It appears the church is too proud to ask.”

Mr Foster has sought a meeting with the Pope, but he said there was no sign of that happening. “I believe if they met with us, not to just deliver an apology but formulate how to move ahead, we could help the church regain a position of authority where they could actually do some good.”

A lawyer specialising in sexual assault, Dr Vivian Waller, said the church continued to try to stymie victims’ attempt to go to court, and force them into a flawed internal church process called Towards Healing.

“It is not independent,” she said. Facilitators were chosen by the church, no information about criminal behavior was passed to police, and compensation was a fraction of that available in court.

Dr Bernard Barrett, a spokesman for Broken Rites which represents some victims of abuse, said the apology should have been for the way his Australian bishops have covered up sexual abuse.

“He must tell his Australian bishops to stop blocking victims’ access to justice in the civil courts,” he said..

At present, if a victim seeks compensation through the Australian civil courts, the church fights the victim fiercely.