

4-7-08 - Pope faces protest over US priests' sex abuse
By Malcolm Moore in Rome, The Telegraph (UK)

The Pope's visit to America next week has been plunged into controversy after the Church decided that he will not address the victims of sex abuse by priests.

Groups representing thousands of victims of sexual abuse by American clergy yesterday threatened to greet the Pope with protests on his first visit to the country.

They will publish full-page newspaper advertisements to condemn his five-day visit because it does not include a stop in Boston, the epicentre of a scandal that has shattered the church in America.

One victims' group has demanded that clergy linked to the scandal should be barred from attending any of the papal events.

The Pope arrives in Washington on April 15 and will also visit New York. He will celebrate mass at two baseball stadiums, say prayers at Ground Zero, meet President George W Bush at the White House and address the United Nations.

Six dioceses in the US filed for bankruptcy last year after paying out \$615 million (£308 million) in compensation to victims of sex abuse by priests. More than 11,000 children have allegedly been molested by 4,300 priests since the late 1950s.

The Vatican insists that any meeting with the victims would reopen old wounds, and several senior aides have indicated that they felt the matter was "now closed".

Monsignor Pietro Sambi, the papal ambassador to the US who was in charge of planning the trip, said the Pope would turn 81 in America, and did not have the strength to visit Boston. "He just can't go everywhere," he said.

Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, the Pope's second-in-command, said the church had already "responded with great dignity" to the situation, and added that the "clamour created in the US around this scandal is really unbearable".

Cardinal Claudio Hummes, the prefect for the Congregation for the Clergy, said the media had "exaggerated" the issue of paedophile priests.

However, the lay Catholic organisation Voice of the Faithful is planning to take out an advertisement in The New York Times to force the Pope to change tack. John Moynihan, the spokesman for the group, said: "What we want is for him to meet the victims of sexual abuse, to hear their stories and to treat them with respect."