

4-17-08 - Sexual abuse victims describe frank meeting with pope
A report from CNN.com

Story Highlights

NEW: "I told him that he has a cancer growing in his ministry," victim says

NEW: Pope seemed to understand "what we were talking about," another man says

NEW: Woman recalls she couldn't say anything, just burst into tears

Benedict "listened to their personal accounts," papal spokesman says

WASHINGTON (CNN) -- Three victims of the sexual abuse scandal that rocked the Roman Catholic Church described an emotional, frank and ultimately hope-filled meeting with Pope Benedict XVI on Thursday.

They were part of a small group of people abused by clergy who were asked to share their stories with the pope in a Washington chapel.

"They prayed with the Holy Father, who afterwards listened to their personal accounts and offered them words of encouragement and hope," said the Rev. Federico Lombardi, a papal spokesman.

The exchanges were frank and unscripted, according to some of the victims.

"I told him that he has a cancer growing in his ministry and needs to do something about it," Bernie McDaid said in an exclusive interview with CNN.

But McDaid said he came away from the meeting feeling that there was real hope that this time the problem would be addressed, with action to follow.

"I don't go to Mass, but today I went with my mother, and his sermon there and his apology about the sexual abuse blew me away, and I had tears in my eyes that I wasn't ready to have. It was an incredible moment for me."

Another victim said his hope was also restored after meeting Benedict.

"He first apologized," Olan Horne said. "He seemed to intrinsically understand what we were talking about."

Horne said the victims were allowed the time necessary to say what needed to be said, which impressed him.

"I'm from Missouri, 'show me,' and today I saw," Horne said.

Faith Johnston said she was praying for the strength to say the right thing to the pope, but when the time came, emotions took over.

"I didn't end up saying anything. I got up to him, and I burst into tears. But I don't think any words I could have said; I think my tears alone spoke so much."

The meeting was believed to be the first between a pope and the victims of clergy sexual abuse, The Associated Press reported.

"This was a big deal; I think that it has surprised everybody," Vatican journalist Delia Gallagher said.

"For the victims, there has been a feeling that there has been a certain silence coming from the Vatican," she said.

"From the beginning, Pope Benedict decided he was going to address that. This personal contact for him was something pretty important."

The latest stop on the Washington portion of the pope's U.S. tour was an interreligious gathering at the Pope John Paul II Cultural Center.

Earlier, celebrating Mass under blue skies in center field at Washington's new ballpark, the pope gave a 20-minute homily that focused on hope, repentance, unity and reconciliation among the 70 million Catholics in the United States. Watch the pope deliver the opening prayer »

"It is in the context of this hope, born of God's love and fidelity, that I acknowledge the pain which the church in America has experienced as the result of sexual abuse of minors," Benedict said.

"No words of mine could describe the pain and harm inflicted by such abuse. It is important that those who have suffered be given loving pastoral attention."

During the Mass, the pope said the church has worked "to deal honestly and fairly with this tragic situation" and to ensure that children are safe. Watch the pope acknowledge the pain caused by abuse »

But he also urged all Catholics to do their part to repair the damage.

Fourteen Roman Catholic cardinals, 250 bishops, 1,300 priests, four choirs totaling 570 singers, and as many as 46,000 worshippers greeted the pope with songs, cheers and reverence. Watch a young fan of the pope go all-out »

"My back is killing me, my knees are aching, and I'm so thirsty, but the pain is worth it," a 77-year-old man from Massachusetts said. He paid almost \$700 for a round-trip plane ticket for one day just to see the pope for a few minutes but said it was worth every penny.

"It's events like these and meeting the people around us that make me proud to be Catholic," said Deborah Moon, a second-grade teacher from Laurel, Maryland. She added that she couldn't wait to go back to class and show her students pictures of the Pope.

Everyone in the park had to go through metal detectors on entering, and nearby roads and bridges were closed.

Temporary flight restrictions were in place over the park, and a 1½-mile section of the adjacent Anacostia River was closed until the Mass concluded just before noon.

As the Mass ended, a smiling Benedict XVI walked in procession with his papal miter on his head and shepherd's staff, or crosier, in his hand. He slowed frequently to shake hands and bestow blessings on those fortunate seated on the field. Watch how hard it was to get tickets »

Benedict will travel to New York on Friday and address the U.N. General Assembly, linking the visit to the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. He'll celebrate Mass on Sunday morning at Yankee Stadium. Where will the pope be? »

One of the stated goals of the pope's visit is to energize the U.S. Catholic community.

CNN's Ed Henry, Elaine Quijano, Susan Roesgen, Bethany Swain and Abby Helman contributed to this report.