

4-18-08 - The Pope Confronts the Priest Sex Scandal

Pleased with the pontiff's response, victims now want the church to follow through
By Alex Kingsbury, U.S. News and World Report

After years of near silence on the issue of the abuse and rape of children at the hands of pedophile priests, Pope Benedict XVI made public acknowledgement of the scandal a central theme of his first visit to the United States as head of the church. The first mention of the scandal came while still en route from Rome when he told reporters he was "deeply ashamed" about the scandal that had caused "great suffering."

It was the first time the papacy had directly addressed the victims of abusive clerics, and it signaled that Benedict's first trip to the United States as pontiff would be not just a state visit but an effort at reconciliation with American believers and an exercise in humility for the church's role in a scandal the pope conceded had been "very badly handled."

The allegations against Catholic priests first came to light in 2002 and have been an open wound for the church ever since, particularly in the cities of Boston and Los Angeles. All told there have been an estimated 13,000 victims and some 5,000 abusive priests since 1950. The church has paid a combined \$2 billion in settlements to victims, most of which was paid in the past six years. Six dioceses around the country have been forced into bankruptcy because of abuse costs.

At an open-air mass inside a Washington, D.C., baseball stadium on Thursday, the pope again raised the traumatic legacy of the scandal. "I acknowledge the pain which the church in America has experienced as a result of the sexual abuse of minors," he told a crowd of 46,000 people. "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. Nor can I adequately describe the damage that has occurred within the community of the church."

For some in attendance it was a fitting response to an issue that has cost the church dearly. "There is still a lot of hurt over the sexual abuse crisis in the church," said Maika Fowler before watching the pontiff deliver his homily. "He has really come to give his support to Catholics who feel discouraged by those kinds of issues in the church today and basically to say: 'I'm here with you, I feel for you, and things are going to get better.'"

The pope has addressed the scandal at nearly every public forum, including the mass in Washington and a meeting with a delegation of bishops.

In a surprise move, Benedict met privately on Thursday to pray with a group of victims. Boston Cardinal Sean O'Malley presented the pope with a book containing the names of 1,000 male and female victims of sexual abuse by members of the Boston archdiocese over the past few decades. "They prayed together. Also, each of them had their own individual time with the Holy Father," said a Vatican spokesman. "Some were in tears."

It was a moving moment, and one long in coming, say many Catholics. Yet while acknowledging that publicly addressing the issue was a good first step, victims and advocates called for greater transparency from the church as a follow-through to the pope's words.

"We've never before heard this type of honesty from the pope about what actually happened, and that's clearly a very encouraging sign — but talk is only as good as the actions that follow it up," said Dan Bartley, president of the Boston-based Voice of the Faithful, a group formed in the wake of the scandal to push for greater transparency and lay involvement in the management of the church. The group took out a full page advertisement in the New York Times in anticipation of the pope's visit calling for the pontiff to meet with victims of pedophilia and the removal of bishops responsible for covering up abuse or transferring known pedophiles within the ministry.

David Clohessy, director of the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests, the country's largest such group, says that what's needed most are actions, like sanctioning bishops and others within the church who helped conceal and shuffle abusive priests to new parishes. "There's not a child on Earth who is any safer because of something the pope says; they will be safer because of what the pope does."

And abusive priests have not passed from the headlines. The day the pope was scheduled to arrive in New York City, a defrocked priest in New York was to be sentenced after pleading guilty to federal charges of enticing a minor for sex. The sentencing was later delayed, though prosecutors insisted it had nothing to do with the pontiff's visit.

With Kent Garber and wire services