

## 4-25-08 - Benedict issues lofty call to eliminate evil of abuse

By Kevin Ferris, Commentary Page Editor, PHILADELPHIA INQUIRER

Pope Benedict XVI didn't raise just the issue of child sexual abuse in the Catholic Church. He raised the bar on how to respond to the crisis.

There was no 10-point to-do list. Instead, appropriately, he took the discussion to a higher level. The question is, can he and his church live up to his words and deeds?

First, of course, was the condemnation. In his meeting with bishops, he called the sexual abuse of minors a "deep shame" that has caused "enormous pain." He spoke of "clerics [who] have betrayed their priestly obligations and duties by such gravely immoral behavior." He mentioned the need to "eliminate this evil."

The victims of this evil, he told the bishops, must be a high priority: "It is your God-given responsibility as pastors to bind up the wounds caused by every breach of trust, to foster healing, to promote reconciliation, and to reach out with loving concern to those so seriously wronged."

He led by example, holding an emotional meeting with victims the next day. There were tears, prayers and blunt talk. "I told him that he has a cancer growing in his ministry and needs to do something about it," Bernie McDaid told CBS News after the meeting.

Benedict was rightly applauded both for this meeting and for his outspokenness on the issue during his U.S. visit. But victims, their advocates and others were also right to immediately raise questions:

Along with counseling and other outreach efforts, would the church act more forcefully against priests who abused children? Or the bishops and cardinals who both enabled and covered up the crimes for decades? Would the church be more forthcoming about the cover-ups, to help ensure they can't happen again? Would it stop fighting efforts to let survivors seek civil redress, which could provide a fuller picture of the abuse and what the pope called the church's "very badly handled" response?

Benedict is aware that appropriate action by the church can do more than help victims of priests. He told the bishops, "By acknowledging and confronting the problem when it occurs in an ecclesial setting, you can give a lead to others, since this scourge is found not only within your dioceses, but in every sector of society. It calls for a determined, collective response."

Again, the pope didn't tell bishops how to act, but it will be hard to ignore his words as they weigh a response to legislation that could benefit society at large but hurt dioceses financially. It will be even harder if the church reconsiders its own statute of limitations on sexual abuse allegations, a possibility raised by a top Vatican official, Cardinal William J. Levada, in an interview last week with the New York Times.

Some of Benedict's most poignant statements came at a meeting with seminarians in Yonkers, N.Y., in which he never specifically mentioned sexual abuse. He was urging young people to follow the path of U.S. saints, pointing out the difference that loving actions can have in the lives of others as compared with the devastating, far-reaching consequences of evil acts.

"What happens when people, especially the most vulnerable, encounter a clenched fist of repression or manipulation rather than a hand of hope? . . . Here, the dreams and longings that young people pursue can so easily be shattered or destroyed. . . . While the causes of these problems are complex, all have in common a poisoned attitude of mind which results in people being treated as objects - a callousness of heart takes hold which first ignores, then ridicules, the God-given dignity of every human being. Such tragedies also point to what might have been and what could be, were there other hands - your hands - reaching out."

And there, at St. Joseph Seminary, he urged a path for young people to follow:

"Look about you with Christ's eyes, listen with his ears, feel and think with his heart and mind. Are you ready to give all as he did for truth and justice? . . . We must respond with a renewed social action that stems from the universal love that knows no bounds. In this way, we ensure that our works of mercy and justice become hope in action for others."

That's a high calling, and certainly Benedict himself knows the difficulty of achieving such a standard amid the pressures and responsibilities of daily life. Nevertheless, his words, his actions and his message of hope suggest that he is ready to lead and help his church meet the challenge.

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