

4-18-08 - Catholics' Viewpoints Vary On Pope's Response To Scandal

Catholics React To Pope's Comments On Scandal

By ELIZABETH HAMILTON, Hartford Courant Staff Writer

When Jayne O'Donnell sat down to listen to Pope Benedict XVI discuss the sex abuse scandal in the Catholic Church Wednesday evening, she flashed back to a moment last May, standing in line while waiting to enter the Sistine Chapel.

Through the windows, she and her husband, Edward, could see the ancient, majestic stone buildings of Vatican City spread out around them. They stood there in a kind of awed silence until Edward nudged her.

"See what you're up against?" he said, referring to O'Donnell's attempts to make church leaders in the Hartford archdiocese accountable for the abuse of children by priests.

The truth of that statement is certainly not lost on O'Donnell this week as she and other Connecticut Catholics closely follow Benedict's first visit to the United States as pope, waiting with varying degrees of anxiety and interest to hear how the 81-year-old pontiff would respond to the scandal that has produced thousands of victims and cost the church more than \$2 billion in settlements.

If anyone feared that the pope would ignore the scandal, they were wrong. Benedict has raised the issue early and often, speaking of it on the plane trip from Rome, while addressing his American bishops Wednesday evening and again Thursday during a Mass attended by 46,000 people at the Washington Nationals stadium. He also held an impromptu meeting with survivors of sexual abuse Thursday.

But as O'Donnell and others have observed, Benedict's statements about the scandal have not left them with much confidence that the pope — while expressing profound shame and sorrow about the abuse — is willing to take the steps they believe are necessary for the church and its people to heal.

At the top of that list are the creation of a worldwide Catholic policy on child sex abuse and the censure of American prelates who ignored or sought to hide the actions of abusive priests.

"He can't ask for all of their resignations, but he can censure them and he should," said O'Donnell, who attends St. Timothy's Church in West Hartford and sits on the national board of trustees of Voice of the Faithful (VOTF) — an organization of mainstream Catholics seeking to change church culture from within.

The closest the pope came to a public scolding of the 300 American bishops and nine cardinals sitting before him Wednesday night, however, was the observation that the scandal was "sometimes very badly handled."

Depending on where they sit — on the altar, in a pew every Sunday, or outside the parish doors — the pope's comments this week rang differently for different Catholics. Also different are their beliefs about where the American church resides on the continuum of healing from the scandal, and how much impact this or any pope can have on that process.

For those who were abused by clergy, the pope's statements about the abuse scandal haven't gone nearly far enough to promote true healing.

"To pay this kind of lip-service to the problem just isn't sincere when we know the church's history has been one of secrecy," said Helen McGonigle, a Brookfield resident who was abused by the Rev. Brendan Smyth when he was posted at Our Lady of Mercy in East Greenwich, R.I., in the 1960s and '70s.

McGonigle can't even really contemplate the church's overall healing — she stopped attending Mass in college and is still focused on her own recovery.

David Clohessy, national director of The Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests (SNAP), was equally critical.

"The message from the church is clear. Molest a kid and you may be suspended, but cover it up and nothing happens," said Clohessy. "No bishop has ever been disciplined, and if the pope were just to do it once, we think it would have a tremendous impact. It would send shock waves through the church."

Clohessy said the church is still mid-point on the healing spectrum — if that.

"I was stunned by the results of an ABC- Washington Post poll that said from February '04 to today, the number of Catholics distraught by the church's handling of the crisis jumped by 20 percent," Clohessy said. "That would strongly suggest that even among mainstream Catholics, nevermind lapsed Catholics, the church still has a long way to go."

But for the Rev. Michael Dolan, vocations director for the Archdiocese of Hartford and the priest assigned to Trinity College in Hartford, the church is further along.

"We've grown in awareness and we've grown in compassion," Dolan said. "I always say that suffering is a great teacher."

Dolan said the church has radically changed the way it screens candidates for the priesthood.

"It used to be that you filled out an index card and there were so many in the seminary they couldn't keep track of them all," Dolan said. "Now we look at everything — and I mean everything — in their lives."

Since 2002, when the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops passed the Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People, each American diocese has been required to provide abuse prevention training for not only its clergy, but anyone who works with children, even in a volunteer capacity.

Each diocese is audited annually to ensure that it is complying with the requirements, and although critics of the church say the church often complies with the letter — and not the spirit — of the charter, Dolan and others said the church now genuinely tries to prevent abuse.

"If you want to sell cookies in the Catholic church, you have to go through training," Dolan said. "They even show you how to hug. You hug from the side. It's this really awkward thing and as they were demonstrating it to us, we were like, 'You've got to be kidding.'"

Bridgeport Bishop William Lori, whose diocese has paid out roughly \$34 million so far to abuse victims, said in an interview before the pope arrived Tuesday that he expected Benedict to "recognize the immense steps the church in the United States has taken to deal with this."

"The church has rounded the corner on this issue," Lori said, adding that parishioners don't want to see the church "spinning its wheels" over the clergy abuse scandal.

Christopher Haddad, a 39-year-old father of three, local attorney, and the youth minister at St. Thomas the Apostle Church in West Hartford, would agree — with some reservations.

"At coffee hour on Sunday morning, the conversation is not dominated by discussions about sexual abuse," Haddad said. "But I think if you ask Catholics how the church has handled this, there's still some frustration and unhappiness."

Haddad, a lifelong Catholic, expressed distress that his church would be so strongly associated with clergy abuse.

"I think people are looking at the church with too narrow a prism when all that they see is the sexual abuse crisis," Haddad said. "I know that the work the church does, and the vast majority of priests, are so much better than this."

The Rev. Ted Tumicki, who has led the Norwich Diocese's Safe Environment office since 2003, said the church's continuing challenge is to "reach out to those who feel disenfranchised by all of this."

Will Pope Benedict be able to move the church forward in that challenge, though?

Tumicki is hopeful, and cites Benedict's quick action, after being appointed pope in 2005, to grant Norwich Bishop Michael Cote's request that the Vatican defrock two accused priests — Richard T. Buongiorno and Bernard W. Bissonnette.

"When the cases came to Rome, he handled them," Tumicki said. "He didn't just sweep them under the rug."

Benedict might be more willing to remove priests, but that doesn't mean Catholics should expect some profound change in message, or behavior from the Vatican, cautioned Andrew Walsh.

Walsh, associate director of the Leonard Greenberg Center for the Study of Religion in Public Life at Trinity College and an expert on American Catholicism, said there is nothing to suggest that Benedict will take a markedly different route than his predecessor, Pope John Paul II.

"Under John Paul there was a willingness to express great sorrow, but there's also a reluctance to open the disciplinary process to anyone outside the hierarchy," Walsh said. "The notion [on the part of the Vatican] is that you have a sacred institution that is floating in a hostile world, a world dominated by sin, and it must be protected by people with not only the right training, but the right authority, to keep the vessel pure."

Walsh said most Catholics understand that, as laity, they have no control over what the Vatican says and does. But that doesn't mean it's always easy to swallow.

"What's difficult for Americans to accept about this is that in the Catholic tradition, there's no real sense that anybody's opinion about anything matters much," Walsh said. "The notion that you're going to establish legitimacy by consulting the laity, that's just not in the cards."

Tell that to O'Donnell, who said she continues to work for more accountability from church leaders and has repeatedly urged Hartford Archbishop Henry Mansell to hold a diocesan-wide Mass of reconciliation and healing.

So far, she said, she hasn't been successful, but that doesn't stop her from going back.

"It's like being at the Vatican. It's a little intimidating, but if you think that way you're going to give up," O'Donnell said. "If you don't try, nothing is going to get done."