

4-23-08 – Follow Visit With Deeds

Hartford Courant, Editorial

By any measure, Pope Benedict XVI's six-day trip to the United States was a stunning success. The 81-year-old pontiff, thought by many here to be distant and intolerant, showed warmth and charm as well as political and diplomatic skill.

He spoke to the beleaguered American Catholic Church of hope and rejuvenation. He navigated the pomp of the White House, prayed quietly at Ground Zero and, perhaps most important, met with victims of sexual abuse by priests. His repeated expression of shame and compassion for the victims of one of the church's worst crises in centuries brought hope to many American Catholics.

For the papal visit to be transformational, however, words of healing must be followed by structural change. It is far from clear that the conditions that caused the sexual abuse crisis have been adequately addressed.

Thus we would encourage the pontiff's attention to a letter as well as a petition being circulated on the Internet for presentation at the end of the month by Voice of the Faithful, a national organization of lay Catholics seeking church reforms.

The group, founded in Boston in response to the sexual abuse scandal, urges change in four areas. It asks the pontiff to:

- Treat survivors of sexual abuse with justice and compassion, not as opposing litigants.
- Hold bishops accountable and ask for the resignations of bishops who knowingly failed to stop abusive priests.
- Embrace full participation of lay Catholic men and women in church decision-making, ending the culture of secrecy that abetted the scandal.
- Require full financial transparency and accountability in all governance matters.

The sexual abuse scandal has been a disaster for the church. The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops has taken strong steps to stop the sexual abuse of children. But the fact that more victims came forward during the papal visit suggests the problem has not been extirpated. It must be.