

5-16-08 - Papal visit a 'both/and' moment in sex-abuse crisis

By MARY GAIL FRAWLEY-O'DEA, Commentary, National Catholic Reporter

Mary Gail Frawley-O'Dea Dispassionate discourse about the sexual abuse of children is an oxymoron. The subject touches our most primitive passions and fears, rendering rational thought and balanced reflection difficult to sustain. Pope Benedict XVI's mid-April visit to the United States set in relief these discursive challenges. Reactions to him tended to devolve into defensive "either/or" dichotomies -- either his visit was a tremendously transformational moment in the scandal or he continued to miss the boat in hurtful ways. In fact, his trip provided a "both/and" moment in the crisis still tearing at the church.

Benedict spoke about the tragedy and evil of sexual abuse five times in a variety of venues. First, he expressed deep shame over the sexual abuse of young people by priests. He also seemed finally to acknowledge that homosexuality and pedophilia are distinctive entities, making it more difficult for commentators to reconstruct sexual abuse by priests as a homosexual phenomenon.

In speaking to reporters on his flight from Rome, the pope said, "I do not wish to talk at this moment about homosexuality, but about pedophilia, which is another thing." The pope continued, "We will absolutely exclude pedophiles from the sacred ministry."

Benedict preached that the sexual-abuse crisis and its consequences are not past history, but rather continue to require the attention and care of all Catholics. This message challenges laypeople, priests and bishops who want to declare a victory.

More important than any of his words, Benedict met with victims. With a pastor's heart, the pontiff touched five victims, symbolic representatives of all victims. Every one of us holds a fundamental responsibility to bear witness to injustice and its attendant suffering and to try to lift up those in pain. Jesus insists on it. Benedict bore witness. How can any American bishop refuse ever again to meet with a victim when the pope offered the fullness of his presence in this way?

Stuck with the trauma

Some victims minimized Benedict's focus on sexual abuse, including his meeting with victims. It was painful to read that some even questioned why these five victims should be chosen, as if somehow certain victims are more worthy than others in what should be an egalitarian sisterhood and brotherhood of sufferers. As painful as the life of a survivor can be, there is an emotional adhesion to the trauma as a primary wellspring of identity that can underlie these reactions. In some ways, yesterday remains for a survivor more salient than today. Yale theologian David Kelsey puts it well: "A problem with defining personal identity as the subject of horrific events is that it distorts one's identity by binding it to [those events]. The problem lies not so much with the horror as with the pastness. One's future [and present, adds by this author] are defined by, and so are in bondage to, an event in the past."

In addition, sexual abuse survivors often have a low tolerance for ambiguity, partial solutions or the gray that characterizes most of life's issues. It is understandable. Early on, perpetrators and bystanders twisted reality, insisting that abuse was love, innocence was guilt, and compliance with power and authority was desire. In the case of the church, survivors coming forward were met with half-truths, secret agreements and pressure to protect the church from scandal. Adult survivors, then, yearning for validation of their experiences with both perpetrators and chancery officials, feel destabilized and suspicious when imperfect gestures seem to be offered as solutions rather than steppingstones. Panic replaces reflection as fears of being let down once again take over in a classic posttraumatic stress response.

Anger important to healing

Recognizing the good the pope did does not invalidate the ongoing suffering of any victim, but it can feel to the survivor like an unacceptable submission to power once perverted. When this happens, rage can substitute for reflection and reconciliation in ways that obstruct healing.

Rage and anger have an important place in the healing process. They are crucial in moving the victim from paralyzing self-blame and shame to more energizing fury at those who should be ashamed and accountable. There is, however, a time for rage and a time for letting it go; a time for fury and a time for moving beyond it. Staying stuck in rage and endless railing against the abuser is counter-healing; it is like swallowing poison and hoping the other guy dies. Only the victim is eaten up from the inside while the abuser and his enablers usually go on about their lives.

Leaders of SNAP (Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests) and others who give voice to survivors must recognize that their reflexively critical responses to any and every gesture by Catholic leaders may keep their social policy and litigation agendas alive, but ill-serve the survivor community whose members need to progress in their healing journeys beyond the place of justifiable, yet ultimately self-inhibiting fury.

It doesn't go away

Ultimately, healing for any adult survivor requires that the fevered flush of fury be replaced with bittersweet mourning for what can never be. In the end, there is no justice available from anyone for a childhood or adolescence torn asunder by sexual exploitation. In the end, there are no gestures available from the abuser or his enablers that can set things to right. In the end, survivors must fight to heal. We may hope this happens within the safety of a relationship with a therapist or other guide, but it can happen without needing to receive anything in particular from those who harmed them.

There can be increasing numbers of today's unclouded by memories of yesterday; there can be sobriety; there can be a cessation of cutting and suicidal thoughts; there can be love and grace; there even can be sex that is joyous and infused with reawakened and shameless desire. But, there can never be justice. In the end, healing takes place apart from abusers, even if at some point victims include abusers and enablers in their journeys. In the end, as incest survivor Louise Armstrong told another abuse survivor who was earlier in the recovery process than Armstrong, it doesn't go away. "It recedes," Armstrong said.

"I don't like that," said the other survivor.

"You don't have to like it," Armstrong replied. "You just have to live with it. Like a small, nasty pet you've had for years."

He missed a big boat

Benedict met with victims, bore witness, and sought to alleviate suffering. We need to tell the truth about that.

And survivors were right on target that Benedict missed a very big boat -- the one with his fishermen in it. The church's sexual-abuse crisis never has been centrally related to abusive priests. It always has been primarily reflective of bishops who failed miserably both as pastors and as corporate leaders. This pope, like the one before him, fails too as pastor and as CEO unless he holds current and future bishops accountable for pastoral indifference and managerial incompetence in not responding quickly, compassionately and effectively to past, present and future sexual abuse by priests and reports of that abuse by victims. American bishops cited by district attorneys and grand juries as complicit in the cover-up of sexual abuse apparently remain on good paper with the pope. Benedict's support of enablers of abuse is inexcusable and rightly stimulates the anger and pain of sexual-abuse victims and all of us who have labored in the abuse vineyard.

If the task of victims is to mourn for what can never be, the task of bishops is to repent for what was. They must tell the truth and ask forgiveness from those who have been harmed. They must do penance in ways

that are meaningful to victims. They must listen and when they speak, they must expect nothing back. Too many bishops, however, cloaked in clerical narcissism, smugly point to their accomplishments of the past few years as if no one has anything to worry about anymore. These bishops fail to remind themselves that any progress made occurred only because victim groups like SNAP, plaintiffs' attorneys, civil authorities, National Review Board members and the media have been breathing down ecclesiastical necks without surcease.

It was infuriating when, for example, Bishop William Murphy of Rockville Centre, N.Y., commented on the pope's discussion of sexual abuse, saying "that there may have been some bishops who mishandled it, that was done I'm sure without malice. ... The point, however, is that for the last five years the church in the United States has addressed the problem." Murphy was cited as follows by the attorney general of Massachusetts: "Even with undeniable information available to him on the risk of recidivism, Bishop Murphy continued to place a higher priority on preventing scandal and providing support to alleged abusers than on protecting children from sexual abuse."

The disconnect between Murphy's appraisal and the state attorney general's, along with other equally self-centered comments by some other bishops, are a disservice to truth and to any efforts at reconciliation.

The empty argument

Benedict trotted out the empty argument that the sexual-abuse crisis reflects the moral relativism and sexual mores of postmodern Western culture. In 1050, however, Peter Damian warned Pope Leo IX about priests who sexually exploited younger people in the church. There was no postmodern philosophy, no contraceptive pill, no Internet porn, not even a printing press in 1050, yet priests were sexually abusing youth. Sexual abuse, unfortunately, is timeless and ahistorical. It is a disingenuous distraction for the pontiff to try to embed sexual abuse in a particular set of cultural norms. That also attacks truth and disrupts reconciliation possibilities.

When Cardinal Francis George, whose own external consultants criticized him for his handling of sexual abuse in Chicago four years after Dallas, expresses satisfaction that the pope put clergy sexual abuse in a wider context of moral relativism, a collective groan goes up. The bishops are at it again -- truth and hope are sacrificed to clericalism and ecclesiastical complacency.

Some bishops showed humility, or at least common sense, in their post-papal remarks. Archbishop Timothy Dolan of Milwaukee, for example, termed sexual abuse a "terrible cancer in the mystical body of Christ. We need to own up to this. We need to apologize." Bishop Gregory Aymond of Austin, Texas, chair of the U.S. bishops' Ad Hoc Committee on Sexual Abuse, acknowledged, "Some would say the crisis is over. As long as victims are still hurting and broken, and there is a need for reconciliation, it is still critical."

Benedict offered meaningful reflection on sexual abuse. And he failed to get to the ecclesiastical nub of the problem in a forceful enough way. As the church continues to face sexual abuse by priests, we press for both/and thinking and meaningful truth and reconciliation efforts by all involved in the crisis.

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