

4-17-08 - Plea to pope: Send a message of compassion
Peggie Cashman, The Journal News (NY)

American Catholics are keen to extend a warm welcome to Pope Benedict XVI on his first official visit to our country. Many also feel that this visit is particularly important and timely. Relations over the years between Rome and the Catholic Church in America have sometimes been characterized by uncertainty, misunderstanding and even mistakes. Part of the reason is that American Catholics live in an enormously powerful secular culture that exerts a formidable tug on our imaginations, our sense of ourselves, our judgments and our priorities. But sometimes, inadequate communication and unwise decisions get in the way of honest and creative exchange between Rome and American Catholics. In times of crisis, like the clergy sexual-abuse scandal of recent years, this can take on tragic proportions.

It is also important to note that the same experience has often enabled the American church to offer important contributions to the universal Catholic Church. For example, it was the American experience of church/state relations that helped shape the declaration on religious freedom, *Dignitatis Humanae*, at the Second Vatican Council, a teaching that became a cornerstone of the pontificate of John Paul II.

The authority of the pope in Rome was never the only marker of Catholic identity in the United States, but it has always been pervasive, sometimes even provocative.

The painful revelations of clergy sexual abuse, which came to light in 2002 and in subsequent years, have been deeply troubling for American Catholics. The visit of Pope Benedict XVI is a vital opportunity for the healing of wounds and the building of (broken) relationships.

The hierarchy and the people

The last years of John Paul II highlighted what some call a "restorationist approach" to Church, one that can be described as a return to the strong hierarchical model that dominated in pre-Vatican II years. The handling of the clergy sexual-abuse crisis in the United States unfortunately demonstrated that model in action, when the hierarchy chose to protect itself rather than the very people it had been ordained to serve.

By addressing this issue in a clear and concrete manner, the pope can address something fundamental to the church itself: the hierarchy - people relationship. The pope needs to speak directly to American bishops: calling, for example, for the resignation of those who repeatedly reassigned predator priests, and insisting that those involved in legal actions stop blocking settlements or resisting the passage of important bills (like the effort to extend the statute of limitations in New York state) that would make the prosecution of perpetrators more likely. The pope needs to remind his representatives, in other words, that they are servants of the servants of God.

Voice of the Faithful

Voice of the Faithful is a worldwide movement of concerned mainstream Catholics formed in 2002 in response to the clergy sexual-abuse crisis. Our goals are to support survivors of clergy abuse, support priests of integrity, and help shape structural change within the Catholic Church. There are many victims of the clergy scandal whose pain has been increased by the absence of the compassion they so badly need from the people they have traditionally looked to as pastors. Since the pope comes as a unique representative of Christ on earth, these survivors need to feel his compassion in a special way.

VOTF believes that if the pope could take some time to listen to their stories, he would show these people and demonstrate to the world that healing is possible for all involved, and that the Church is able to learn from its mistakes and grow, the way all of us are told to do. The Christian Church's work is about redemption, which can be simply understood as liberation from illusion and the realization of potential: something we all seek. If the pope can do these two simple things during his visit - give a clear message to his bishops and a compassionate one to his people - he will contribute in real ways to this essential work.

In a world torn by confusion and fear, people everywhere seek honest and compassionate leaders, wherever they come from, religious or secular. By confronting the troubled relationship between Rome and the American church the pope could help transform the relationship into a model of mutual enrichment and learning that could be applied to many other critical situations throughout the world, from Tibet to Iraq.

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