

5-11-08 - Pope offers hope, but church has to act
By MICHAEL T. DOLCE, The Palm Beach Post, Florida

Pope Benedict XVI arrived in our country on April 17. He apologized for the sexual abuse of children by priests and the actions of bishops who, for decades, rather than call police secretly reassigned pedophiles to new parishes to victimize thousands more children.

The pope encouraged all to "do what you can to foster healing ... and to assist those who have been hurt." He asked us "to ensure that children ... can grow up in a safe environment."

I have been asked whether his words were sufficient. First, let me stress that I am not anti-Catholic or anti-religion. I am very active in my church. I wrote a book on spiritual recovery. I love and respect my big brother, who is a Catholic monk. I was not harmed by a priest as a child.

But I did listen carefully to the pope's message for clergy sex abuse victims, because I know a lot of them. I share their pain because as a child two neighbors lured me into their home, bound me, and took turns raping me. They threatened me into silence with a gun and a knife. And that was just how that summer began.

To understand my opinion, know that as the pope spoke of "reconciliation" in our nation's capital, church leaders and lobbyists in Florida's capital were making sure that legislation designed to bring child rapists to justice failed.

I have promoted that legislation - this year, it was Senate Bill 528 and Senate Bill 1194 - for five years, using my knowledge and the contacts I made during four years as a state Senate aide to move it through committees a dozen times. But as I was told in a 2004 letter, the "archbishop and bishops of Florida" decided to use their political clout with committee chairpersons, who control hearing agendas, to make sure the legislation never moves to a final vote.

The legislation would extend the criminal statutes of limitation in cases of victims as young as 13 - currently cut off when the victim turns 21 - and for civil actions - currently cut off when the victim turns 25. It would extend those deadlines based on the time victims need to heal enough in mental health treatment to be able to confront perpetrators in court. Under present law, many abusers are never brought to justice because their victims remain silent beyond age 25.

I was one of them.

Why the delay?

Perhaps the pope put it best: "No words of mine could describe the pain and harm inflicted by such abuse." Sex abuse so overwhelms children that they often lapse into denial and turn to destructive ways to cope. Many develop post-traumatic stress disorder, living in fear of virtually everything. Many starve themselves with eating disorders. Others numb the pain with addictions. Others mutilate themselves to "see the pain flow out," as one victim said to me, having sliced her flesh open hundreds of times with a razor blade.

As we work to heal from these mental health problems, we must stabilize before confronting a perpetrator in court. Otherwise, we risk relapse into destructive behaviors, including suicide. Forgive us, but it takes time to heal.

Florida's Catholic leaders know this, stating in the 2004 letter that "publicly acknowledging that one was a victim of childhood abuses is undoubtedly extremely difficult." But they want to preserve laws that force us to choose between our survival and bringing rapists and those who harbor them to justice.

The reason is money.

In 2004, a church lobbyist told a Senate committee that if my legislation passed, the church's liability insurance premiums might go up, and payments to treat victims would

"interfere" with the church's other "missions." In my opinion, the church is wrong and makes the pope's statement that children are "our greatest treasure" ring hollow.

Church leaders might interject, as stated in the 2004 letter, that "we do not oppose in principle attempts to broaden the criminal statute of limitations." But on the same day the pope spoke in Washington, Sen. Alex Villalobos, R-Miami, made the final decision to refuse a committee hearing for another limitations reform bill, a strictly criminal one. He supported the church's fear that it might be amended to add civil relief and cost the church money.

As a result, child rapists will continue to go free, including a priest who the Miami-Dade County State Attorney's office wrote in January could not be prosecuted because the statute of limitation had expired. In my opinion, the church is not living up to the pope's words, "to ensure that children .. can grow up in a safe environment."

A few miles from my home, a rapist of three children roams free because the statute of limitation has expired. One of those victims who came forward too late, Jeff, did not survive. In his mother Patti Robinson's words: "Jeff put a bullet where it hurt most. In his heart." In my opinion, the pontiff's minions are not taking his words to heart. As one of the church's lobbyists said to me last year: "You're going to lose. I don't understand why you don't just go home."

Indeed, the lobbyist does not understand. He does not understand that I have survived worse than anything he could inflict. The people I speak for have survived hell on Earth. If the pope is to be the one to lead us to Heaven, the church's actions must match his words.

Amen.
