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POPE BENEDICT IN AMERICA - APRIL 2008  
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Pope Benedict surprised many by his emphasis on the clergy sex abuse issue during his visit to the United States. Although the highlight of his visit was billed as an address to the United Nations, his words and actions in regard to abuse captured the attention of the media and the masses. He spoke directly to the issue before his plane had even landed in Washington on April 16. He went on to address it forthrightly in his talk to the assembled bishops at vespers on April 16 and again in his homily at the open-air Mass on April 17. Without doubt the most surprising and meaningful acknowledgment was his private meeting with a small group of clergy abuse survivor/victims at the Vatican embassy on April 17.

It is well worth noting that Pope Benedict said more and did more relative to the worldwide plague of clergy sexual abuse in five days than his predecessor did in two decades. John Paul II was aware in detail of the sex abuse issue from the time it emerged from hiding in late 1984. For reasons unknown he waited until 1993 before he publicly acknowledged it and between then and his death in 2005 he spoke publicly to the issue eleven times. Over the years individual victims and victims' groups had repeatedly asked to be received in audience by the pope. Not only were none of these requests honored but they were not even acknowledged. For all practical purposes, the victims of the worst scandal in church's history since the dreadful days of the Spanish Inquisition were non-persons as far as the Vatican was concerned. Not so with Benedict XVI.

A bit of historical context is in order. In 2002 when the Boston revelations made clergy abuse an unavoidable reality for the hierarchy both here and in Rome, Benedict, then head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, was interviewed and gave the usual party line:

I am personally convinced that the constant presence in the press of the sins of Catholic priests, especially in the United States, is a planned campaign, as the percentage of these offenses among priests is not higher than in other categories, and perhaps it is even lower. ... Less than 1% of priests are guilty of acts of this type. ... Therefore, one comes to the conclusion that it is intentional, manipulated, that there is a desire to discredit the Church. In 2004 Judge Anne Burke and two other members of the U.S. Bishops' National Review Board by-passed the U.S. Church's episcopal leadership and arranged a visit with the cardinal. Judge Burke described her visit in an address at the 2005 gathering of Voice of the Faithful in Indianapolis. Not only did he reply to her request for an audience almost immediately but he devoted at least two hours to listening to the three lay persons from the U.S. Whether or not he agreed with their critical remarks was not the point. He was willing to listen and, according to Judge Burke, he gave every indication of hearing and understanding.

The most dramatic indication of Papa Ratzinger's attitudinal shift from 2002 was his move on the late founder of the Legionaries of Christ, Marciel Maciel-Degollado. Though he was blamed by some as the one who put the brakes on the canonical investigation into Maciel's sexual abuse of young seminarians, the orders to shut down the investigation originated with John Paul II and were transmitted by Cardinal Angelo Sodano, Secretary of State under John Paul II. (Incidentally Sodano was the first person to be awarded an honorary doctorate of jurisprudence by the University Europea di Roma, founded in 2005 by the Legion.)

Not long before John Paul II died the investigation of Maciel was re-opened by the CDF and in May of 2006, the Vatican announced that a series of restrictions had been imposed on him including the restriction on celebrating Mass in public. He died on January 18, 2008 in Houston, Texas and was buried privately in Mexico. It is certainly significant that the Vatican issued no statement on the occasion of his death and sent no representatives to his funeral.

This backdrop changes the significance of the pope's statements and actions. In the course of his visit Pope Benedict:

1. Admitted that sexual abuse is a "suffering" for the whole church (Interview 4-15- 08)
- 2 .Admitted that he did not understand how priests could "fail in this way" (Interview, 4-15-08)
3. Expressed shame that it had happened (Interview, 4-15-08)
4. Isolated pedophilia from homosexuality (Interview, 4-15-08)
5. Urged action on three levels - justice, political and pastoral (Interview, 4-15-08)
6. Admitted that the problem "sometimes was very badly handled" (Vespers, 4-16- 08)
7. Told the bishops that their responsibility as pastors was to bind up wounds caused by the breach of trust (Vespers, 4-16-08)
- 8, Urged bishops to address the problem in the Church first and thereby give example to others (Vespers, 4-16-08)
9. Acknowledged the pain experienced by the Church and by the victims (Sermon, Washington D.C., 4-17-08)
10. Admitted the great damage done to the Church (Sermon, Washington D.C., 4-17- 08)

There are some who will interpret the attention the pope gave to the problem as a sign that the crisis is passed and the Church can now move on. Such a hope is a combination of wishful thinking and naiveté. If anything this is a long overdue indication that the pope and hopefully the Vatican bureaucracy, are beginning to comprehend the profound ramifications of the legacy of clergy sexual abuse and hierarchical duplicity in the ecclesial culture. For many the pope's words and gestures, no matter how sincere and well meaning, come far too late. Many people have developed a realistic and well founded cynicism about anything said or done by Catholic Church office holders in response to the sexual abuse issue. This will not be turned around in a week. The pope's words, symbolic gestures and visit with victims cannot possibly undue the decades of damage done and mistrust sown by the dark legacy of betrayal.

Pope Benedict's words and gestures are both an encouragement that there is progress and a disappointment that some of the key dimensions of denial remain. In particular I was disappointed that he appeared to support one of the recurring excuses of the bishops, that they did not understand the nature of the problem ("Now that the scale and gravity of the problem is more clearly understood"...Vespers, 4-16-08). Perhaps this argument has some small element of authenticity if one considers that the bishops have been formed in a celibate system that has isolated them much of life's harsh realities. On the other hand it is almost incomprehensible that any adult male would claim that he did not realize that an adult (priest or not) who has sex with a child or a minor is doing something that is both wrong and gravely harmful.

Unfortunately Pope Benedict also resorted to the same kind of blame shifting that John Paul II inserted every time he referred to clergy abuse. Like the late pope he tried to soften the Church's responsibility by laying some of the blame on pornography and violence available through the media. He went on to advise the bishops to address the problem within the "wider context of social mores." The problem is not secular society but dysfunctional clerics. They have betrayed the trust of believers not only in our era but also in decades and centuries past. Furthermore it was not sex and violence in the media that caused the bishops to cover up, deny and minimize the problem. It was a misguided notion of what leadership in the Catholic community is all about.

I believe it would have been better to avoid mention of damage to priests and to the community. Pope John Paul II repeated his narcissistic concern for the pain experienced by the bishops and priests in almost every public utterance about the problem. It served only to harden the impression that the Church leadership at the highest levels didn't "get it." Pope Benedict's words of compassion seemed genuine. It would have been better had he concentrated on the real victims and their loved ones and not those affected by collateral damage.

The third and most important area of disappointment lies in the pope's obvious misunderstanding about the role played by the bishops in this whole tragic affair. Though he admitted that it had been badly handled, such a conclusion could hardly be avoidable. However the bad handling was not the result of tactical mistakes or bungling based on lack of information. The "bad handling" was the result of intentional actions by

bishops to avoid responsibility for the persons harmed as well as to avoid damage to their image and power. The history of civil and criminal trials, legal settlements and grand jury reports has made the reality of the reasons for the bad handling unavoidable.

It is possible that the pope is actually aware that bishops have grossly mishandled the problem and continue to do so. Since the ecclesiastical governmental structure is built on the hierarchy it is understandable though hardly excusable that the pope would choose not to blame them publicly. In either case he needs to know that although he said "Rightly, you attach priority to showing compassion and care to victims," this has not been the case. The most glaring deficiency in the Church's response has been the deplorable lack of pastoral care. It is not accomplished through victim advocates, payments for psychological counseling or lay review boards, many of which respond as callously as the clerics. The pope and bishops may think they have extended pastoral care but they need to speak directly to victims to learn that their attempts have largely been futile. There may indeed be good will and honorable intentions but in this area, the traditional training in pastoral outreach has been ineffective.

The danger that a betrayal of trust on a scale such as that which we have witnessed will happen again in the near or distant future remains acute so long as the hierarchy resists the painful self-examination into their essential role in it. Moving a step further, this honest self-examination will only happen when there is a shift from the understanding of the Church as monarchy to church as community. When the Church achieves this stage of evolution towards true community, the welfare of the vulnerable will no longer be sacrificed to the image and power of the hierarchy.

One must understand the nature of the clerical culture within the Church in order to appreciate the positive dimensions of the Pope's words and gestures. We need not agree with the powerful influence of clericalism but it is a reality we can't overlook. Within this context some of what the pope said is quite remarkable.

He admitted his personal feeling of shame. What is striking here is that he personalized this shame and did not speak in third person generalities such as several of the cardinals and bishops have when they have said "if mistakes were made we apologize." In conjunction with the admission of shame the pope proposed action on three levels which clearly are a challenge to the bishops: justice, political and pastoral. The recent history of the hierarchy's involvement is testimony to their failure on each level. Perhaps the pope is much more insightful than many give him credit for. We can't forget the action he took with regard to Maciel which was, in the context of the clerical culture, surprising to say the least.

He confronted the distinction between pedophilia and homosexuality. Presuming that by "pedophilia" he included all sexual abuse of minors, his words hopefully dismissed the attempts to scapegoat homosexuality as an orientation as the root cause.

His emphasis on pastoral engagement is a challenge that given by the pope and therefore has massive value. Clearly he sees the crisis as not over but continuing. From now on every type of response by the bishops collectively and as individuals must be challenged to fulfill the papal mandate for pastoral authenticity. When the bishops persist in doing everything in their power to block State legislation that is beneficial to sex abuse victims, including the use of false information, strong-arm lobbying and threats, they must be challenged with the pope's call to action on the political level and to an attitudinal adjustment: "Rightly you attach priority to showing compassion and care to the victims."

When some bishops persist in narcissistic denial with the ludicrous claims that "there may have been some bishops who mishandled it, but that was done I'm sure without malice, (Bishop William Murphy of Rockville Centre) or "I personally do not accept that there has been a broad base of bishops guilty of aiding and abetting pedophiles..." (Cardinal Levada, April 18, 2008) they need to be reminded that the pope told them all that it had been badly handled. The disconnect between their collective self-serving denial and reality will not be easily repaired and therefore it must continually be challenged.

Pope Benedict surely disappointed some for not taking any of the decisive actions that many see as essential such as canonical prosecution of bishops accused of sexual abuse and removal of bishops found to be complicit in the enabling cover-up and related negligence. On the other hand he managed to make clergy sexual abuse the central issue of

his visit. Whatever he said at the United Nations will soon be forgotten and the worlds' leaders will continue on as they had before with little visible impact from having heard the pope's words. What he said and did with regard to the abuse problem will not fade away and will indeed have on-going impact.

The scourge and shame of clergy sexual abuse is not going to disappear simply because some Catholics in high and low places are tired of hearing about it. The pope's visit resulted in a surge of new victims emboldened to come forward. The institutional Church is still on the defensive and denial is all around. To carry the healing to its next level Pope Benedict should insist on the following:

Bishops in every State and country should not only support but should actively work for civil legislation that will protect children and the vulnerable from abuse, including radical reform of Statutes of Limitation and retroactive suspension of such statues in order to provide the opportunity for justice for all victims.

Those archbishops and bishops who have facilitated campaigns to defeat proposed legislation and have relied on lies, slanted information and personal attacks on legislators (e.g., the bishops of Maryland, Washington D.C., Colorado, Ohio, and Wisconsin) must be ordered to apologize to those whom they have slandered and to cease the proliferation of dishonesty.

There must be effective research into the unique type of pastoral care needed for victims of clergy sexual abuse both at the time the abuse is revealed and on a long-term basis.

The devastating nature of the spiritual damage done must be acknowledged and examined and effective means developed to assist victims in filling the spiritual void left by abuse.

Bishops should cease all legal opposition using civil law processes while recognizing that the legal tactics employed by their attorneys are destructive, hypocritical, financially extravagant and within their control.

The sexual abuse and exploitation of vulnerable adult men and women by clerics must be acknowledged and confronted with as much aggressiveness and commitment to change as the sexual abuse of minors.

The pope's words and actions fell short of the expectations of many whose lives have been devastated by clerics and the Church. This disappointment is understandable given the legacy of non-response to this problem by a Church in denial. For those of us who are pragmatically optimistic as we continue to forge a path to justice and compassion, there are significant elements of hope embedded in his words and especially in his visit with survivors. The scourge of sexual devastation by the representatives of the Church has woven itself into the Church's culture for centuries. More has been accomplished to eradicate it in the past two decades than in the previous thousand years. If anything, the pope's words in April 2008 have reassured me that the efforts of victims, their supporters, the secular media, the attorneys, the sympathetic lay people and clerics and even those few supportive bishops have made a difference.

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