

## 4-22-08 - WILL WE ANSWER BENEDICT'S CHALLENGE?

Stamford Advocate, Editorial

Regardless of your faith - or absence of it; whether you are Catholic, a lapsed Catholic or strongly opposed to particular beliefs espoused by the church, Pope Benedict XVI's visit last week was cause for celebration, even if what he had to say at times challenged our own comfort.

It was an opportunity to rejuvenate, to reboot, and start anew with the reminder that there is more to this life than the day-to-day routine; there are deeper concerns than the often petty slights we let distract us; there are broader responsibilities than putting in a good day at the office; there are greater rewards than an Audi.

For Catholics, of course, having the pope in our midst was a chance to get close to the very core of their faith. For members of the Roman Catholic Church, the pope is God's representative here on Earth. That's something to keep in mind for those who might have been mystified by all the hoopla that took over the New York region during the past several days.

But even the cynics had to take some encouragement from seeing so much attention being devoted to someone of actual substance for once. It would be hard to imagine changing the channel from pope coverage to some talking head droning on about Britney's antics or Ivana's wedding without stopping to think seriously about what we value in our culture.

The pope himself didn't dwell on many specific issues while here. Instead, he tended to deal with broader topics of faith. Nonetheless, it was gratifying to American ears to hear him speak directly and often about the child sex abuse scandal that rocked the church in this country. With good reason, church leadership has been criticized for covering up the problem and being secretive even after its scope became known. (Cardinal Edward Egan, the pope's host for much of his visit, has been justly criticized for his handling of the issue while head of the Diocese of Bridgeport).

The church leader's remarks were a sign of the forthrightness and candor so many people, in and out of the church, have waited too long to witness. The American church will benefit greatly if his example signals the start of a new era.

But the pope also challenged the faithful as well, letting them know that the responsibility of their faith does not end when they exit the pew on Sunday. To live well is to overcome "every separation between faith and life, and countering false gospels of freedom and happiness," he told attendees at the Yankee Stadium Mass on Sunday. "It also means rejecting a false dichotomy between faith and public life."

That's a tall order. It means it doesn't really matter if the CEO goes to church on Sunday if on Monday he lays off 200 people to bump up the profit margin.

But the pope's words have resonance for all Americans. The bottom line is a powerful force in our country. At particularly dispiriting moments it can seem like it's the only one. Is it possible to reconcile that with what the pope had to say? What are the consequences if it's not? Big questions that we'd like to avoid.

And what about the "false gospels of freedom and happiness"? Entire industries in our culture exist to let us know we shouldn't be satisfied, that we deserve more, bigger, better, younger, sexier. And no matter how many people we see crash and burn on that route, so many of us appear desperate to follow.

How important, then, to have a fresh voice arrive to tell us we should be more concerned with what we can give than what we should get.

If we Americans take nothing else from Pope Benedict's visit to our shores, let it be that.