

Pope Meets with Abuse Victims

by Susan Brinkmann, OCDS

Staff Writer

(April 18, 2008) Between several high-profile events during his third day in the U.S., the Pope surprised the world by attending a private meeting with victims of clergy sex abuse. The session is believed to have been the first ever between a Pope and victims of the scandal.

“They prayed together,” said papal spokesman, Rev. Federico Lombardi. “Also, each of them had their own individual time with the Holy Father. Some were in tears.”

The meeting lasted about 25 minutes and took place in the chapel of the papal embassy between scheduled events. The Archdiocese of Boston’s Cardinal Sean O’Malley attended the meeting along with a small group of victims. During the meeting, Cardinal O’Malley presented the Pope with a notebook containing the names of 1,000 victims of sexual abuse in the Archdiocese of Boston.

Three victims who were present at the meeting spoke publicly about what they described as an emotional, frank and ultimately hope-filled meeting with the Pope.

“I told him that he has a cancer growing in his ministry and needs to do something about it,” said survivor Bernie McDaid in an interview with CNN. He then put his hand on the Pope’s heart.

“He looked down at the floor and back at me, like, ‘I know what you mean,’” McDaid said. “He took it in emotionally. We looked eye to eye.”

The moment, and the day, was full of first for McDaid. “I don’t go to Mass, but today I went with my mother, and his sermon there and his apology about the sexual abuse blew me away, and I had tears in my eyes that I wasn’t ready to have. It was an incredible moment for me.”

Olan Horne, another victim who was present at the meeting, also said that his hope was restored after talking with Pope Benedict. “He seemed to intrinsically understand what we were talking about,” he said.

“He stood three feet from us, and you could tell he was heavy, heavy with responsibility,” Horne said. “He looked at us deeply. You could see he searched for words, that he was thinking.”

Each victim was invited to spend a few minutes talking with the Pope.

Gary Bergeron, 45, an outspoken abuse survivor from Boston who did not attend Thursday’s session, told the *Associated Press* that he failed in his attempt to meet with Pope John Paul II during a visit to the Vatican a few years ago.

He called Thursday’s meeting between survivors and the Pope “a long-sought-for-step in the right direction.”

“The Catholic Church is partly based on symbolism and I think the symbolism had he not met with the survivors would have been horrendous,” he said.

Joelle Casteix, an official of the *The Survivors Network of Those Abused by Priests* (SNAP) called the meeting a “small, long-over due step forward on a very long road.”

While confident that the meeting was meaningful for all, it won’t change things, Casteix said.

“Kids need action. Catholics deserve action. Action produces reform and reform, real reform, is sorely needed in the Church hierarchy. . . . The Pope has been given the reins of a vast, wealthy, powerful global monarchy. He must use those reins to safeguard the vulnerable. We cannot confuse words - even sincere, eloquent ones - with deeds. The stakes are too high.”

The Pope has made atonement for the crisis an unexpected focal point of his visit to the U.S. He was only expected to address the matter once, in New York City on Saturday during a Mass in St. Patrick’s Cathedral with priests and religious. However, he began talking about the crisis even before his plane landed on Tuesday.

While still on board “Shepherd One,” Benedict told reporters that the crisis was a cause of “deep shame” and vowed to keep pedophiles out of the priesthood. On Wednesday, in an address to bishops, he again spoke about the crisis, calling it “badly handled.” During the Papal Mass in Nationals Stadium on Thursday, he asked the congregation to “do what you can to foster healing and reconciliation, and to assist those who have been hurt.”

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