

## **Pope Challenges U.S. Bishops**

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(April 17, 2008) The Pope's comments to U.S. bishops regarding the sex abuse crisis received most of the headlines but this was only one of several challenges Pope Benedict XVI posed to them during an address at the National Basilica on April 16.

In addition to protecting children from any further damage from a "badly handled" sexual abuse crisis, he made it quite clear that he also expects them to do a lot more than they are to combat secularism, the erosion of the family, and to foster a holier priesthood.

After praising the 200 year history of Catholicism in America, the pope outlined his expectations of the nation's Bishops.

They are supposed to lead the people to the living God, he said, but in order to do this, they must first clear away some of the "barriers" to this encounter with God, he said.

"In spite of a genuinely religious spirit in the country, secularism nevertheless colors the way people allow their faith to influence their behavior," he said. "Is it consistent to profess our beliefs in church on Sunday, and then during the week to promote business practices or medical procedures contrary to those beliefs? Is it consistent for practicing Catholics to ignore or exploit the poor and the marginalized, to promote sexual behavior contrary to Catholic moral teaching, or to adopt positions that contradict the right to life of every human being from conception to natural death?"

"Any tendency to treat religion as a private matter must be resisted. Only when their faith permeates every aspect of their lives do Christians become truly open to the transforming power of the Gospel."

Bishops must also counter materialism, he said. "People today need to be reminded of the ultimate purpose of their lives. . . . It is easy to be entranced by the almost unlimited possibilities that science and technology place before us; it is easy to make the mistake of thinking we can obtain by our own efforts the fulfillment of our deepest needs. This is an illusion. Without God, who alone bestows upon us what we by ourselves cannot attain, our lives are ultimately empty."

In contemporary American society, the Gospel should be preached and taught "as an integral way of life," he said, "offering an attractive and true answer, intellectually and practically, to real human problems. The 'dictatorship of relativism', in the end, is nothing less than a threat to genuine human freedom, which only matures in generosity and fidelity to the truth."

But all of this requires proper Catholic education and formation. "In an age that is saturated with information, the importance of providing sound formation in the faith cannot be overstated," he said. "American Catholics have traditionally placed a high value on religious education, both in schools and in the context of adult formation programs. These need to be maintained and

expanded,” he said.

Advances in medicine that have raised previously un-imagined ethical challenges makes the availability of solid Catholic formation essential.

“This makes it more important than ever to offer thorough formation in the Church's moral teaching to Catholics engaged in health care. Wise guidance is needed in all these apostolates, so that they may bear abundant fruit; if they are truly to promote the integral good of the human person, they too need to be made new in Christ our hope.”

The leaders of the Church are also called upon to participate in the exchange of ideas in the public square to help shape cultural attitudes. “In the United States, as elsewhere, there is much current and proposed legislation that gives cause for concern from the point of view of morality, and the Catholic community, under your guidance, needs to offer a clear and united witness on such matters.”

Bishops are also responsible for countering the social trends that are leading to the collapse of the family through divorce, cohabitation, and infidelity, which is leaving children without a stable environment in which to be raised.

Quoting from John Paul II's *Familias Consortio*, he said, ‘The person principally responsible in the Diocese for the pastoral care of the family is the Bishop ... he must devote to it personal interest, care, time, personnel and resources, but above all personal support for the families and for all those who ... assist him in the pastoral care of the family.’ It is your task to proclaim boldly the arguments from faith and reason in favor of the institution of marriage, understood as a lifelong commitment between a man and a woman, open to the transmission of life.”

Calling the sexual abuse crisis in America one of the “countersigns to the Gospel of life,” he urged bishops to continue to strive to eliminate this “gravely immoral behavior” and to show compassion and care to victims.

“It is your God-given responsibility as pastors to bind up the wounds caused by every breach of trust, to foster healing, to promote reconciliation and to reach out with loving concern to those so seriously wronged. Responding to this situation has not been easy and, as the President of your Episcopal Conference has indicated, it was ‘sometimes very badly handled’.”

While praising the policies already implemented to protect children from further abuse, the Pope said these efforts must be placed in a wider context.

“Children deserve to grow up with a healthy understanding of sexuality and its proper place in human relationships. They should be spared the degrading manifestations and the crude manipulation of sexuality so prevalent today. They have a right to be educated in authentic moral values rooted in the dignity of the human person.”

He again emphasized the centrality of the family and the need to promote the Gospel of life to

achieve this end. “What does it mean to speak of child protection when pornography and violence can be viewed in so many homes through media widely available today? We need to reassess urgently the values underpinning society, so that a sound moral formation can be offered to young people and adults alike.”

He called upon everyone, including the laity, to assist in this effort. “All have a part to play in this task - not only parents, religious leaders, teachers and catechists, but the media and entertainment industries as well. Indeed, every member of society can contribute to this moral renewal and benefit from it.”

But ultimately, he told the bishops, “It falls to you, as pastors modeled upon Christ, the Good Shepherd, to proclaim this message loud and clear, and thus to address the sin of abuse within the wider context of sexual mores. Moreover, by acknowledging and confronting the problem when it occurs in an ecclesial setting, you can give a lead to others, since this scourge is found not only within your Dioceses, but in every sector of society. It calls for a determined, collective response.”

At this stage in the sex abuse crisis, the Pope told the bishops that “a vital part of your task is to strengthen relationships with your clergy, especially in those cases where tension has arisen between priests and their bishops in the wake of the crisis. It is important that you continue to show them your concern, to support them, and to lead by example.”

When asked later about the crisis in vocations, his answer was blunt. “Let’s be quite frank: the ability to cultivate vocations to the priesthood and the religious life is a sure sign of the health of a local Church. There is no room for complacency in this regard.”

He encouraged the bishops to get their strength from prayer. “Time spent in prayer is never wasted,” he said, “however urgent the duties that press upon us from every side.”

He specifically mentioned adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, the Rosary and fidelity to praying the Liturgy of the Hours. These prayerful habits “continually remind us of the need to remain focused on doing God’s work, however many pressures and distractions may arise from the task at hand.”

Before ending the session, he presented Archbishop Alfred Hughes of the Archdiocese of New Orleans with a chalice as a sign of his prayerful solidarity with the people of New Orleans for the immense suffering they endured in the wake of Hurricane Katrina “as well as their courage in the challenging work of rebuilding.”

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