

What victims hear in pope's talk on sex abuse

By *Thomas P. Doyle*
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Examining the crisis

Every time Pope Benedict XVI says something about the never-ending sex abuse nightmare, he inches closer and closer to the dark reality that has been like a black cloud over the church for more than two decades. And although he is slowly moving forward, he always stops short of the most important and no doubt for him, the most painful issue: the complicity of the world's cardinals and bishops.

With his talk to the assembled Vatican curia on Monday ^[3] he showed courage in the presence of many who are still in denial, by admitting the extent of the violation of minors "to a degree we could not have imagined." I suspect that this admission was fueled in no small part by the explosive revelations in Europe especially the mishandling of a serious case during his very own watch as archbishop of Munich.

After that blunt admission Pope Benedict unfortunately retreated to the same set of excuses we have been hearing for years.

First, the focus is on the offending *priests* but never a word about the bishops whose culpability for the cover-up cannot be diminished because of a sexual disorder.

Second, he wondered what it was in the living out of the Christian life that allowed the plague to happen. It's not clear to me if he was referring to the clerical life or to the entire church. In either case his question is off base. He should have urged his audience and the hierarchy in general to ask what caused their understanding of the *church* to become so distanced from fundamental Christian values that bishops were willing to sacrifice the innocence of the most vulnerable for the protection of the institution. He could also have urged or better yet insisted that they all look long and hard into the style of episcopal governance that enabled hierarchs and priests to live under the delusion that because of their holy orders, they are above the law.

Third, he could have clarified that this is not a problem the responsibility for which rests on the entire church. It is not the laity's fault that priests abused and bishops enabled.

Fourth, the Holy Father should back off from persistently trying to attach some of the blame to secular society and what he sees as a perversion of morality. His statement that in the 1970s pedophilia "was theorized as something fully in conformity with man and even with children" is mind boggling. Whoever gave him that piece of nonsense should be fired. There have always been very small groups of people whose brains are so convoluted that they think sex with children is good for the children and good for society. Some of these people are still on the loose, such as the members of NAMBLA and not a few are long-term residents of correctional institutions. On this point a personal recollection: In 1971, I did several months training in a maximum security state prison. I vividly recall that the inmates most despised and most persecuted by other inmates were the child abusers. The "context of these times," child pornography, the sexual revolution and the other major targets of the era are not to blame for the existence of compulsive sexual disorders and they surely are not the reasons why the bishops intentionally stiff-armed victims. It is not a misguided secular culture that compels them to continue to protect abusive clerics in so many different ways, spending millions of dollars to defeat any proposed civil laws that would benefit all victims, and steadfastly refusing to disclose the documentary records of confirmed abusers.

John Allen, in his response yesterday, "On the Crisis, does the pope have it right?" ^[4] sums up the pope's theological argument: proportionalism. There surely was a lot of proportionalist thinking in the revolutionary '60s and '70s but it never surfaced as a reason why a priest or bishop systematically groomed and then seduced a victim. Why not try giving the proportionalist excuse another twist. If the morality of an action is never cut and dry but depends on the "good versus evil" of the circumstances, what can be said of those so-called church leaders who relativized the good or evil of disclosing a child rape by a priest against the good or evil of protecting the institutional church from a serious blight on its image?

Pope Benedict made another qualified breakthrough by actually thanking those who "stand alongside those who suffer and have been damaged." He singled out "the many good priests" but limited his gratitude to those who assist by helping victims restore their trust in the church and their "capacity to believe her message." I have tried to be a support for hundreds of victims over more than two decades ... victims from several countries. Trying to reconcile men and women who have been raped or molested by priests, with the institutional church is nothing short of a particularly cruel form of re-victimization. The pope may have learned a lot about victims over the past few years but it's clear that he still needs to understand the profound nature of the spiritual damage done to them.

Benedict's praise for priests who have helped victims is an insult to the many priests, brothers, religious women and even bishops who have stood publicly with and for the victims and openly named the causes rather than sticking up for the institution. Every one of them has been either marginalized by the clerical

culture, penalized by the system or as in the case of two bishops, forced from their positions by the Vatican.

Cheerleaders for the hierarchy lavish praise on the pope any time he speaks out about the sex abuse debacle. At the same time many of the same cheerleaders criticize victims and survivors who react with pessimism asking "will they ever be satisfied." These people need to know that the most important recipients of any papal message are the victims.

The pope's words must be seen from the perspective of the victims for to evaluate them from any other source of reference is to miss the point of why he is even addressing this topic in the first place. The credibility of any statement made by a pope or bishop stands or falls on the perception of those who have been devastated by abuse and those who have survived. In the beginning, and in the end, this is really only about them.

[Tom Doyle is a priest, canon lawyer, addictions therapist and long-time supporter of justice and compassion for clergy sex abuse victims.]