

A pastor and a shepherd

Holy Week, 2010

DURING HIS HOMILY AT THE PAPAL MASS at Nationals Park in April 2008, Pope Benedict XVI's voice became sorrowful as he said, "It is in the context of this hope born of God's love and fidelity that I acknowledge the pain which the church in America has experienced as a result of the sexual abuse of minors. No words of mine could describe the pain and harm inflicted by such abuse. It is important that those who have suffered be given loving pastoral attention."

Then after leaving the crowd of nearly 50,000 people after the Mass, the Holy Father was true to his words. With no media present, he met with five abuse survivors at the Apostolic Nunciature. They had a chance to speak with Pope Benedict personally, and he prayed with them, listened to their stories, and offered them words of hope and encouragement, as a pastor would. A Vatican spokesman later said that the meeting was emotional, and some were in tears.

In recent weeks, a relentless media campaign has been underway in Europe and now the United States, criticizing the leadership of Pope Benedict XVI. These unfair attacks are against a man who has done more than anyone to strengthen the Catholic Church's child protection policies and implemented stronger measures against abusive priests, making it easier for the Church to defrock them. And as the pastor of the Church, he has met personally with abuse survivors, and recently wrote a strongly worded letter to the Catholics of Ireland, apologizing to abuse victims there.

THE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops issued a March 30 statement, expressing "deep concern for those harmed by the crime and the sin of sexual abuse by clergy and to express our profound gratitude for the assistance that Pope Benedict XVI has given us in our efforts to respond to victims, deal with perpetrators and to create safe environments for children."

The bishops noted that they know from experience of Pope Benedict's deep concern for those hurt by sexual abuse, and they added, "We continue to intensify our efforts to provide safe environments for children in our parishes and schools. Further, we work with others in our communities to address the prevalence of sexual abuse in the larger society."

Context is often lacking in the media coverage of the sexual abuse of children, which is a societal problem that affects all religions, all demographic groups and most often occurs in families. The Catholic Church has adopted stringent child protection policies, including those in the Archdiocese of Washington, which can be found at www.adw.org. As Pope Benedict also said at Nationals Park, "Great efforts have already been made to deal honestly and fairly with this tragic situation,

and to ensure that children – whom our Lord loves so deeply (cf. *Mark* 10:14) and who are our greatest treasure – can grow up in a safe environment. These efforts to protect children must continue."

Each case of abuse is a cause for sorrow and shame, and the Catholic Church needs to do all it can to bring healing and hope to the survivors of abuse. The specific cases being reported on in the media also need to be put in context, because incidents of abuse that occurred decades ago happened in a time when our society, our legal system, professional therapists and Church leaders lacked the understanding of the problem of child abuse that we have today. Vatican officials have pointed out that in the case of a Wisconsin priest who allegedly sexually abused deaf children, the Vatican was informed of the case more than two decades after the abuse had been reported to diocesan officials and the police, and civil authorities had not filed charges. By that time, the priest was elderly and in poor health and had expressed repentance for his actions. Four months later the priest died.

POPE BENEDICT'S VISIT TO WASHINGTON offered us a glimpse of the man who leads our Church, and that, too, provides context that is lacking in much of the current media coverage. After personally meeting with the Holy Father at the Apostolic Nunciature in Washington, one abuse survivor said later, "My hope was restored today."

The theme of Pope Benedict's April 2008 visit to the United States was Christ Our Hope, and he spoke that message and lived it during his visit. The Holy Father had come as a shepherd, as a teacher and as a pastor, bringing Christ's hope to the crowds who cheered him and to the small group of suffering people he prayed with at the Vatican Embassy. A few days after the pope's plane left Washington, one Catholic father who had brought his family to the Nationals Park Mass said of Pope Benedict, "I'm proud of him."

TWO YEARS LATER, the Holy Father's words offer us a roadmap for facing the challenges and difficulties of daily life, challenges he confronts every day in leading the Church. In closing his homily at Nationals Park, Pope Benedict said, "Those who have hope must live different lives! ... By your prayers, by the witness of your faith, by the fruitfulness of your charity, may you point the way toward that vast horizon of hope which God is even now opening up to his church and indeed to all humanity: the vision of a world reconciled and renewed in Christ Jesus, our Savior."

In this Easter season, we know that Jesus brings new life to a world wounded by sin and abuse. Pope Benedict, who this Holy Week will walk the Way of the Cross in sorrow and then experience the joy of the risen Christ at the Easter Vigil, will continue his pilgrimage as a herald of Christ's hope to a world that needs his witness, now more than ever.