

A Week of Hope

The Catholic Review

It was a week that most of us will long remember and gratefully recall!

In a message videotaped before his arrival, Pope Benedict XVI clearly stated the theme he would develop in keeping with “three simple but essential words: ‘Christ Our Hope.’” He said he wished to “proclaim this great truth: Jesus Christ is hope for men and women of every language, race, culture and social condition.”

And in the relatively few major addresses, the Holy Father proclaimed that message unmistakably to Catholics and non-Catholics alike, ever sensitive to the beliefs of others in his audiences. So densely packed with theological and spiritual insights, his addresses will have to be re-read and studied in the weeks ahead in order to mine their rich content.

Equally important and meaningful as were his words, was his very presence and the intangible magnetism which drew millions to see and listen in person or through the media which offered generous coverage. Not only did we flock to see him, but he reached out with the Good Shepherd’s concern to those who might otherwise be overlooked: the victims of clergy sexual abuse, handicapped children, the survivors and mourners of victims of the September 11th attacks at Ground Zero.

On several occasions the Holy Father pointed to the historical and foundational role which the Church of Baltimore has played for more than 200 years since the formal beginnings of American Catholicism. In addressing the bishops of our country, he recalled “with admiration and gratitude the life and ministry of John Carroll, the first Bishop of Baltimore—a worthy leader of the Catholic community in your newly independent nation. His tireless efforts to spread the Gospel in the vast territory under his care laid the foundations for the ecclesial life of your country and enabled the Church in America to grow to maturity.”

Our 200th anniversary as an Archdiocese and the creation of the dioceses of Boston, New York, Philadelphia and Bardstown (now Louisville) were specially

commemorated during the Pope's final Mass of his stay, Sunday, at Yankee Stadium. I am particularly grateful to Edward Cardinal Egan and to the Archdiocese of New York for the special and generous hospitality offered to Cardinal Keeler and me and others of us from the "Mother Church."

The Holy Father addressed many issues important to our Church in the United States, including interreligious relations, Catholic education, priestly vocations, and the challenges facing our young people—who make up more than 60 percent of our Church—all topics for future reflection. One area of special emphasis present in many of the Holy Father's public statements during the visit—from the in-flight interview en route to the United States to his homily at St. Patrick's Cathedral on the next-to-last day of his visit—pertained to the sexual abuse of minors by representatives of our Church.

In his meeting with the bishops of the United States on Wednesday, the Pope said, "Rightly, you attach priority to showing compassion and care to the 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."

This has been the guiding principal of our pastoral outreach to all victims of abuse here in the Archdiocese of Baltimore. We offer immediate and indefinite counseling assistance to any victim who comes forward alleging abuse and we maintain an open dialogue with victims to determine how we can best assist them in addressing their changing needs. Over the past 15 years, we have paid over \$1.5 million toward counseling and related healing for victims and their families. More recently, in light of requests from victims that they be given direct assistance in lieu of such counseling, the Archdiocese over the past several months has entered into settlement agreements with 13 victims who were paid a total of just under \$1 million. We do this not because we are required by a judge or some law to do so, but because it is the morally just thing to do.

The Holy Father also emphasized the importance of creating safe environments for children entrusted to our care. "Now that the scale and gravity of the problem is more clearly understood, you have been able to adopt more focused remedial and

disciplinary measures and to promote a safe environment that gives greater protection to young people.”

I am grateful that in our Archdiocese we have long had strong policies and practices in place to do just that. To date, over 50,000 employees and volunteers in our Church have undergone mandatory background checks and training. Be assured of our ongoing efforts to strengthen and improve these procedures so that no child in our care will ever again be harmed.

While there was much public and media speculation prior to the visit about whether the Pope would even acknowledge the abuse crisis, the Holy Father surprised many by not only speaking about it frequently and directly, but also by meeting personally with victims from the Boston-area.

“I acknowledge the pain which the Church in America has experienced as a result of the sexual abuse of minors,” the Holy Father said. “No words of mine could describe the pain and harm inflicted by such abuse.”

Our prayer is that the Holy Father’s heartfelt words and caring actions will provide healing and reconciliation for our Church and for everyone affected by the sin of sexual abuse. May all of us reflect on the central theme of his visit: Christ Our Hope, and live in such a way that we reflect the hope that comes from our faith in Jesus Christ.

The Archdiocese of Baltimore is committed to the openness and transparency called for in the U.S. Bishops’ Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People, and encourages anyone who has any knowledge of child sexual abuse to come forward, and to report it immediately to civil authorities. If clergy or other church personnel are suspected of committing the abuse, please also call the Archdiocesan Office of Child and Youth Protection Hotline at 1-866-417-7469.