

Addressing U.S. bishops, pope defends church efforts on sex abuse

VATICAN CITY - In a speech to U.S. bishops, Pope Benedict XVI defended the church's "honest efforts" to confront the priestly sex abuse scandal with transparency, and said its actions could help the rest of society respond to the problem.

While the church is rightly held to high standards, all other institutions should be held to the same standards as they address the causes, extent and consequences of sexual abuse, which has become a "scourge" at every level of society, the pope said Nov. 26.

On wider issues, including the institution of marriage, the pope encouraged the bishops to speak out "humbly yet insistently in defense of moral truth." Responding to the challenges of a secularized culture will first require the "re-evangelization" of the church's own members, he said.

The pope made the remarks in a speech to bishops from the state of New York, who were in Rome for their "ad limina" visits. The group was led by Archbishop Timothy M. Dolan of New York, who as president of the U.S. bishops' conference has spoken of the need to restore the church's credibility and its evangelizing capacity.

The pope began his talk by recalling his 2008 visit to the United States, which he said was aimed at encouraging Catholics in the wake of the sex abuse crisis. He said he wanted to acknowledge the suffering inflicted on victims as well as the church's efforts to ensure the safety of children and deal "appropriately and transparently with allegations" of abuse.

"It is my hope that the church's conscientious efforts to confront this reality will help the broader community to recognize the causes, true extent and devastating consequences of sexual abuse, and to respond effectively to this scourge which affects every level of society," the pope said.

"By the same token, just as the church is rightly held to exacting standards in this

regard, all other institutions, without exception, should be held to the same standards," he said.

Pope Benedict's speech was the first in a series of five talks he is expected to deliver in coming months, as 15 groups of U.S. bishops make their consultative visits to Rome. He said he planned to focus primarily on the urgent task of "new evangelization."

The pope said many of the U.S. bishops had shared with him their concern about the "grave challenges" presented by an increasingly secularized society in the United States. He said it was also interesting to note a widespread worry about the future of democratic society in general, by people who see "a troubling breakdown in the intellectual, cultural and moral foundations of social life" and growing insecurity about the future.

He suggested that the church could and should have a key role in responding to these deep changes in society.

"Despite attempts to still the church's voice in the public square, many people of good will continue to look to her for wisdom, insight and sound guidance in meeting this far-reaching crisis," he said.

In that sense, he added, the present moment is "a summons to exercise the prophetic dimension of your episcopal ministry by speaking out, humbly yet insistently, in defense of moral truth, and offering a word of hope, capable of opening hearts and minds to the truth that sets us free."

At the same time, the pope said, the seriousness of the challenges facing the church in the United States cannot be underestimated. He said one big problem was that secularization affects the lives of Catholics, leading at times to "quiet attrition" among the church's members.

"Immersed in this culture, believers are daily beset by the objections, the troubling questions and the cynicism of a society which seems to have lost its roots, by a world in which the love of God has grown cold in so many hearts," he said.

For that reason, he said, modern evangelization is not something aimed only at

people outside the church.

“We ourselves are the first to need re-evangelization,” he said. That must include critical and ongoing self-assessment and conversion, and interior renewal in the light of the Gospel, he said.

The pope praised the U.S. bishops for their response to the issues raised by increasing secularization, and their efforts to articulate a common pastoral vision. He cited as examples the bishops’ recent documents on political responsibility and on the institution of marriage.

In the end, the pope said, the effectiveness of the church’s witness to the Gospel in the United States is linked to “the recovery of a shared vision and sense of mission by the entire Catholic community.”

He said Catholic universities have an important role in promoting this renewal and ensuring the success of “new evangelization,” especially among younger generations.

“Young people have a right to hear clearly the church’s teaching and, most importantly, to be inspired by the coherence and beauty of the Christian message, so that they in turn can instill in their peers a deep love of Christ and his church,” he said.

The pope also spoke about the implementation of the revised translation of the Roman Missal, which is being introduced in the United States during Advent. He thanked the bishops for making this a moment of catechesis about the liturgy, saying that a weakened sense of the meaning of Christian worship inevitably leads to a weakened witness of the faith.

He said consolidating America’s “proud tradition of respect for the Sabbath” would help renew U.S. society in accordance with God’s “unchanging truth.”