

Bishops feel hopeful, optimistic after meeting with pope

WASHINGTON – Bishops from across the country left their April 16 meeting with Pope Benedict XVI feeling more hopeful and optimistic about their work and the future of the U.S. Catholic Church.

From the issue of the clergy sex abuse scandal to challenges posed by an increasingly secular society, bishops contacted by Catholic News Service said the pope's message of hope grounded in deeper prayer, renewal and strong leadership is one which they can take back to their home dioceses.

The theme of hope has been a hallmark of Pope Benedict's papacy almost since the day of his election three years ago. Bishops hearing his address at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington said they felt encouraged by the pope's support for their work despite the many challenges stemming from the abuse scandal.

"The whole idea is that the Holy Father is challenging us to be optimistic and hopeful and not to let secularism and rationalism keep us from having hope," said Bishop Sam G. Jacobs of Houma-Thibodaux, La. "We have a message of hope and we have a message that can transform the world. We need to keep hearing that message even if the rest of the world doesn't hear it."

For Bishop Gerald F. Kicanas of Tucson, Ariz., the bottom line is that "we be men of prayer ourselves."

"He was very encouraging to the bishops, very pastoral in reminding us that it's really about holiness and the need for a bishop to be on a spiritual journey himself," Bishop Kicanas said. "I think he was challenging us in expressing the feeling that all of us have in regard to the sexual abuse issue in terms of shame and that he was in tune with what we're doing in terms of providing a safe environment for children."

Bishop Thomas G. Doran of Rockford, Ill., echoed those sentiments. He came away from the early evening meeting feeling that Pope Benedict was urging that "we

bishops have to go back to being bishops according to the New Testament – what Jesus asked of the apostles is still being asked of us today.”

Cardinal Roger M. Mahony of Los Angeles called attention to the fact that the pope addressed the clergy abuse scandal for the third time in two days during the address, meaning it was an issue of great concern to him.

“I think we need to hear that,” he said. “He needed to bring it up and needed to speak to the American Catholic community. I think that’s very important. We’ve got to recognize the crisis and, more important, to take steps to make sure it never happens again.”

Despite concerted efforts to implement the norms for clergy behavior and the reporting of abuse cases that were developed by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops in Dallas in 2002, Archbishop Wilton D. Gregory of Atlanta said Pope Benedict acknowledged that much work remains for local bishops, especially in promoting healing for abuse victims and the need to ensure safe environments for children and families.

“I thought (the pope’s address) was absolutely a splendid and clear summons to the body of bishops to continue the work that we are doing, to expand it to work with men and women in other venues of the nation to protect children, and is really an endorsement of the work we have done thus far,” said Archbishop Gregory, former president of the USCCB.

“He talked about how we have made a good beginning. It’s certainly not the completion of a long pastoral task, but certainly a beginning,” he added.

Bishop John B. McCormack of Manchester, N.H., also found the pope’s message encouraging.

“Whether it’s healing people or helping young people find authenticity in their life, he wants us to be leaders,” he said. “So rather than being critical of finding what’s wrong in society, he was urging us to be good leaders, to be good shepherds, to be prayerful men, to be helpful to our priests.”

Pope Benedict’s reminder that the U.S. Catholic Church was founded by immigrants

struck home with Cardinal Mahony. The cardinal has been particularly critical of U.S. immigration law and has been a leading proponent of comprehensive immigration reform in recent years.

“He pointed out that the first bishops and the first Catholics in this country were all immigrants,” the cardinal said. “He wanted us to continue welcoming immigrants and to continue standing with them.”

The fact that the meeting went nearly 45 minutes longer than expected also left an impression on the bishops. “That means he really wanted to be there,” said Bishop Blase J. Cupich of Rapid City, S.D.

Contributing to this report was Julie Asher.