

Victims speak of abuse to pope

WASHINGTON - Pope Benedict XVI held an unscheduled meeting with victims of priestly sexual abuse, shortly after pledging the church's continued efforts to help heal the wounds caused by such acts.

The Vatican said the pope met privately in a chapel at the apostolic nunciature with "a small group of persons who were sexually abused by members of the clergy." The group was accompanied by Cardinal Sean P. O'Malley of Boston, which was the epicenter of the abuse scandal.

"They prayed with the Holy Father, who afterward listened to their personal accounts and offered them words of encouragement and hope," a Vatican statement said.

"His Holiness assured them of his prayers for their intentions, for their families and for all victims of sexual abuse," it said.

Jesuit Father Federico Lombardi, Vatican press spokesman, told journalists the meeting involved victims from the Archdiocese of Boston and lasted about 25 minutes. During the encounter, each of the five victims had a chance to speak personally to the pope, who spoke some "very affectionate words," he said.

Father Lombardi said it was a very emotional meeting; some were in tears.

"It's what I've wanted since 2003," said Bernie McDaid of the papal meeting, "and now I finally got it." He was one of numerous youngsters abused in the 1960s and '70s by then-Father Joseph Birmingham, who has since been laicized.

Faith Johnston, 23, who as a young teen was abused over several months by a

Colombian priest inside her parish's rectory, told CNN of the papal meeting, "I had my mother's rosary beads, which she gave to me before I left home, and I was clutching those and praying for the strength to say the right thing."

Ms. Johnston added, "I didn't end up saying anything (to Pope Benedict). I got up to him and I burst into tears. But honestly, I don't think any words I could have said ... my tears alone - it just spoke so much."

Olan Horne, abused by Birmingham after he was transferred by Boston archdiocesan officials from Mr. McDaid's parish to his own, told CNN April 17 that one thing he, Mr. McDaid and Ms. Johnston had to do during the meeting "was to allow the Holy Father to be the Holy Father. And I think there was a great balance between that and him hearing us.

"I've been hopeful; I've been hopeful for eight years. I have struggled in my spirituality. But hope has been my faith, and my hope was restored today. From what I heard, and I believe we received a promise today, and I believe not only myself but a lot of people received a promise today," he said, adding that he believed Pope Benedict spoke sincerely and addressed the issue at the Mass at Nationals Park.

Mr. McDaid told CNN: "Today's (papal) Mass did something. I don't go to Mass, but today I went with my mother, and his sermon there and his apology about the sexual abuse blew me away, and I had tears in my eyes that I wasn't expecting to have. It was an incredible moment for me."

Ms. Johnston said Pope Benedict "congratulated me on my upcoming wedding, and he said he would pray for me and my future husband and for our future family."

Mr. Horne told CNN the meeting with the pope "was unscripted, it was free-flowing. There was no filter to it whatsoever. We had unfiltered access. Nobody told us we

couldn't say what we want. And everybody in that room did say exactly what they wanted to say," and that Pope Benedict was "forthright" in his responses to their questions.

At the end of the meeting with the victims, Cardinal O'Malley gave the pope a book listing the first names of the approximately 1,000 victims of sexual abuse in the archdiocese within the last several decades, Father Lombardi said, so the pope could remember them in his prayers.

The pope has spoken three times about clerical sexual abuse since he left Rome April 15 for his six-day visit to the United States, expressing the sense of shame he and other church leaders feel about what he called a "tragic situation."

On each occasion, he made a point to encourage church leaders and all Catholics to help those harmed by the abuse.

Some groups criticized the pope for not visiting Boston on this trip and for not scheduling an encounter with victims. Vatican officials had not ruled out such a meeting, but indicated that if it occurred it would be very private.

Barbara Blaine, president of the Survivors' Network of those Abused by Priests, praised the victims for having "the courage to come forward and speak up" but said she did not think the meeting "will change anything."

"Kids need actions," such as punishment for those "supervisors and bishops who have enabled and covered up for predators," she told Catholic News Service.

Another positive step that Pope Benedict could take "with one stroke of the pen," Ms. Blaine said, would be to mandate that any priest who flees a country where he had been accused of sexual abuse be immediately returned to that country to face the consequences of his actions.

She also said it was “extremely disappointing” that the victims were accompanied by Cardinal O’Malley, recently named by SNAP as one of the “worst U.S. cardinals” in terms of his response to clergy sex abuse.

“That was probably not the best decision,” Blaine said. “He hasn’t even put into place the basics to help children protect themselves” from predators.

According to SNAP, one in five children in the Archdiocese of Boston has not received the safe environment training mandated by the “Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People,” approved by the U.S. bishops at their Dallas meeting in June 2002.

On the plane taking him to the United States April 15, Pope Benedict told reporters: “If I read the histories of these victims, it’s difficult for me to understand how it was possible that priests betrayed in this way their mission to give healing, to give the love of God to these children.”

Addressing the U.S. bishops April 16, he said sexual abuse was one of the “countersigns to the Gospel of life” and lauded their efforts to ensure these acts will not happen again.

At a Mass in Nationals Park April 17, he said that “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.”

The pope lauded the efforts to deal “honestly and fairly with this tragic situation and to ensure that children – whom Our Lord loves so deeply and who are our greatest treasure – can grow up in a safe environment.”

“I encourage each of you to do what you can to foster healing and reconciliation and to assist those who have been hurt. Also, I ask you to love your priests, and to affirm

them in the excellent work that they do,” he said.

Contributing to this story were Nancy O’Brien and Mark Pattison.