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Friday, April 18, 2008

Pontiff consoles abuse victims

Pope meets with some affected by sex scandal; Metro area Muslims join interfaith gathering.

Deb Price / Detroit News Washington Bureau

WASHINGTON -- Pope Benedict XVI met privately Thursday with victims of sexual abuse by clergy, following a Mass for 46,000 Catholics at a baseball stadium here.

The pope and Boston Cardinal Sean O'Malley met with five or six victims and gave them encouragement and hope, according to the Rev. Federico Lombardi, a papal spokesman.

The emotional meeting was part of a packed day for the 81-year-old pope, who is on a six-day visit to the United States.

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In addition to the lavish Mass, the pope spoke to Catholic educators, including Sister Frances Nadolny, director of education for the Archdiocese of Detroit, and the Rev. Gerald Stockhausen, the president of the University of Detroit Mercy.

He ended the day with an interfaith meeting with 220 representatives from five religions, including Imam Sayed Hassan Al-Qazwini of the Islamic Center of America in Dearborn.

At the meeting with victims, some of whom cried, the pope said he would pray for them, their families and all victims of clergy sex abuse, Lombardi said. The 25-minute meeting took place in the chapel of the papal embassy and is believed to be the first time a pope has met with victims.

Bernie McDaid said in an interview with CNN he told the pope he was an altar boy when he was abused and "it wasn't just sexual abuse, it was spiritual abuse. And I want you to know that. And then I told him that he has a cancer growing in his ministry, and needs to do something about it. And I hope he hears me ... and he nodded."

McDaid and two other victims said in the interview that the meeting was candid and emotional.

Olan Horne, who said he attended the meeting, told National Public Radio that the meeting gave him a "sense of fulfillment."

"For eight years, I've been asking to hear the words from the top, and from no one else," Horne said.

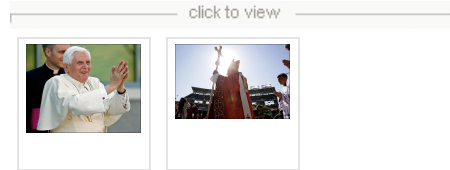
"And we heard them today. And we heard them face to face, without a filter, without a proxy. It wasn't symbolic. It was from him to me."

The sex scandal has shaken the commitment of some Catholics to the U.S. church, which has paid out \$2 billion to victims since 1950.



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Pope Benedict XVI celebrates Mass Thursday at Nationals Park. (Mark Wilson / Getty Images)



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Pope's itinerary

Today: Addresses United Nations; visits synagogue in New York City; prayer service with leaders of other Christian groups.
Saturday: Mass at St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York City; meets with young Catholics.
Sunday: Visits ground zero; Mass at Yankee Stadium; returns to Rome.
Source: U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops

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Barbara Blaine, the president of the Chicago-based Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests (SNAP), said the step by the pope won't stop abuse unless leaders are held accountable if they cover up such activity.

"We know the courage it took for the victims to speak," she said. "But the church will always have pedophiles. What needs to be done is holding people accountable who hide and cover up the abuse."

Mosque leader meets pope

At the meeting with religious leaders, Dearborn's Qazwini, leader of the nation's largest mosque, was among those called forward to speak individually with the pope.

Following the meeting, Qazwini said he told the pope they had met two years ago at the Vatican, where the Muslim asked him to lead efforts to establish permanent dialogue between Muslims and Catholics.

" 'Today, Your Holiness, I ask you for the same,' " he said of his conversation with the pope. " 'Muslims and Catholics form over 50 percent of the world's population. And they are in desperate need to having a dialogue among themselves.' And he agreed with me on that," he said.

Qazwini told the pope he'd been in Iraq two weeks ago. " 'Iraq is going through a very difficult time, with 5 million orphans,' " he said he told the pope. " 'Iraq is suffering a great deal because of the war. It needs your serious attention.' "

At the interfaith meeting, the pope, speaking in a thick German accent, said, "May the followers of all religions stand together in defending and promoting life and religious freedom everywhere. ... (W)e can be instruments of peace for the whole human family."

Also attending were Michigan Muslim leaders Victor Ghalib Begg and Eide Alawan.

Cardinal Adam Maida, archbishop of Detroit, attended events throughout the day. The meeting of religious leaders took place at the John Paul II Cultural Center, founded by Maida.

He gave the pope a pair of 18-karat gold cuff links with the cultural center's logo and a bound book with the names of 12,000 donors who helped pay for the pope's visit to the cultural center. The pope gave him a photograph of Pope John Paul II.

Mass at Nationals Park

The day began with the pope arriving at Nationals Park in his popemobile, a bullet-proof enclosure in the bed of a Mercedes-Benz truck.

Maida entered in a procession with the other U.S. Catholic bishops and the pope and assisted in the Mass. About 75 Catholic laypeople from Michigan were at the Mass after getting much-sought-after tickets from the Archdiocese of Detroit. Nine current and retired Michigan bishops attended.

Raymond Mote of Redford said he went to the Mass because "it's a once in a lifetime experience."

Well-known Michiganians at the Mass included U.S. Reps. Thad McCotter, R-Livonia, who authored a House resolution welcoming the pope; Dale Kildee, D-Flint; Joe Knollenberg, R-Bloomfield Hills; and Bart Stupak, D-Menominee.

The baseball field had been converted into an open-air cathedral. At center field was a 14-foot hand-carved cross with a 6-foot fiberglass Christ. The stadium was packed.

A green tarp covered the pitcher's mound; home plate was covered by a target embossed with the colorful cross seal of the Archdiocese of Washington. The Mass was the first nonbaseball event held at the park, which opened March 30.

As he did when speaking to bishops Wednesday night, the pope directly addressed the sexual abuse scandal.

"No words of mine could describe the pain which the church in America has experienced as a result of the sexual abuse of minors," the pope said.

Nancy Pelc from Oxford flew in with her husband, Gilbert, for the Mass.

"This Mass is very important to us as Catholics," she said. "The pope is the leader of our faith. It's important for us to come together as a faith and show our unity."

The Associated Press contributed to this report.

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