

Pope Offers Apology to Victims of Sex Abuse by Priests



Arturo Mari/Associated Press

Pope John Paul II meeting with American cardinals yesterday in his private library. He said sexual abuse of minors was "by every standard wrong."

No Clear Signal on Policy for Violators

By MELINDA HENNEBERGER

ROME, April 23 — Pope John Paul II opened meetings today with American cardinals on clerical sex scandals with a strongly worded apology to victims. But he sent conflicting signals on a proposed zero-tolerance policy for priests who abused minors.

"People need to know that there is no place in the priesthood and religious life for those who would harm the young," the pope said in his most explicit speech on the topic. He said such sexual abuse is "by every standard wrong and is rightly considered a crime by society."

"It is also an appalling sin in the eyes of God," the pope added.

But he also seemed to suggest that offending priests might deserve a second chance, saying, "We cannot forget the power of Christian conversion, that radical decision to turn away from sin and back to God, which reaches to the depths of a person's soul and can work extraordinary change."

The pope made his remarks to 12 United States cardinals who traveled here this week for two days of meetings that they hope will help restore trust in a church thrown into crisis by sexual abuse scandals and by the disclosures that some church officials did little to protect parishioners from abusive priests.

In his speech, the pope seemed acutely aware of the damage that had been done. To the victims and their families, wherever they may be, I express my profound sense of solidarity and concern," he said. [Text, Page A22.]

Although the meeting was closed to reporters, the Vatican released the text of the speech. American church officials discussed it with the news media later. One official said that the pope had greeted each cardinal by name and that he had left after the speech.

After the meeting, which included other Vatican leaders, several American cardinals said they were not sure how to interpret the remarks, particularly as they applied to a proposal that would automatically bar priests accused of sex abuse from the ministry.

"It isn't clear to me" whether the pope was saying he endorsed the zero-tolerance policy, Cardinal Francis E. George of Chicago said. "He says there's no place in the priesthood for those who harm the young, but also speaks of conversion. So I'm not sure where that leaves us on zero tolerance, and there is no consensus" among bishops.

Several Americans cited the difficulty of applying a zero-tolerance policy, particularly given the emphasis on the possibility of redemption. [News analysis, Page A22.]

Cardinal George described the tone of the first session as "very serious, even somber."

At meetings that continue on Wednesday, American bishops are looking to John Paul and other top

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The New York Times

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Vatican officials for guidance as they draft national protocols on how dioceses can prevent abuse. They will have lunch with the pope on Wednesday, hope to draw up a working list of proposals by the end of the day, and intend to approve the guidelines at their national meeting in June in Dallas.

As expected, church leaders addressed a number of sensitive topics today, including the role of homosexuals in the priesthood and Catholic seminaries.

"People mentioned problems in society," Cardinal Theodore E. McCarrick of Washington said. "One was sexual permissiveness. One was homosexuality. One was lack of commitment."

Celibacy was a central focus, Cardinal George said, "not in questioning the rule for the church, but asking how can we strengthen it."

At a briefing after the meeting, the head of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Bishop Wilton D. Gregory, talked of his concern about the large number of gay men in the priesthood.

"One of the difficulties we do face in seminary life or recruitment is made possible when there does exist a homosexual atmosphere or dynamic that makes heterosexual men think twice" about entering because they fear harassment, Bishop Gregory said. "It is an ongoing struggle to make sure the Catholic priesthood is not dominated by homosexual men."

There is no clear consensus on whether homosexuals should be ordained or whether homosexuality is linked to the current scandals, in which many victims are boys.

Cardinal McCarrick said the crucial issue was celibacy, whatever a priest's orientation.

Cardinal George, on the other hand, seemed to draw a distinction not only between priests who prey on children serially as opposed to those who pursue sexually mature minors in a single instance, but also between those who make advances toward boys as opposed to girls.

Referring to John J. Geoghan, a former Boston priest accused of abusing near 200 boys over 30 years, Cardinal George said, "There is a difference between a moral monster like Geoghan and an individual who, perhaps under the influence of alcohol," engages in inappropriate behavior with "a 15- or 17-year-old young woman who returns his affections."

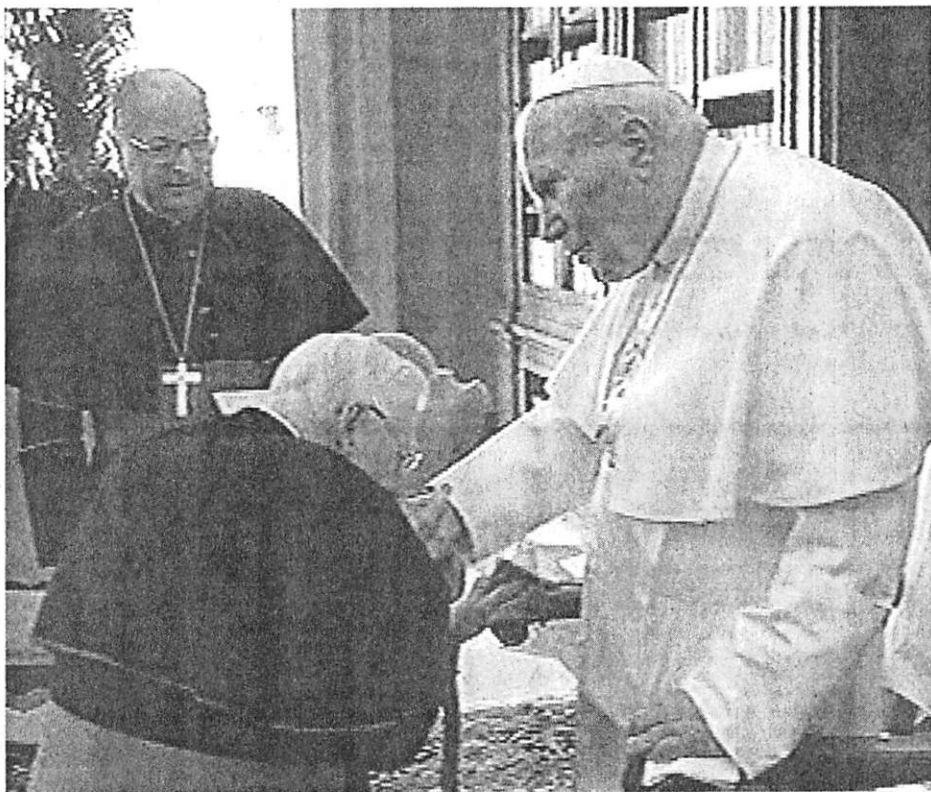
Last week, Cardinal Roger M. Mahony of Los Angeles raised the expectations of many American Catholics by saying that he intended to bring up whether women should be ordained and whether priests should be allowed to marry.

Those issues were not raised today, and they will not be, as it turns out. In an interview today, Cardinal Mahony said that he not only had not mentioned them in the meetings, but that he also did not intend to.

Asked about having raised the hopes of some Catholics only to disappoint them, the cardinal said it was lay people who would be raising the issue, not at these meetings, obviously, but at a conference in his archdiocese next year.

In more general terms, though, he said: "I'm for discussion of anything within the church. We've had a married clergy since Day 1, and the question is whether that needs to be revisited and expanded."

Cardinal Mahony also said neither he nor anyone else at the meeting had raised the issue of whether Cardinal Bernard F. Law of Boston should resign. In a possible effort to shore up support among fellow cardinals, Cardinal Law apologized to them on Monday night at a closed-door meeting.



APTN, via Associated Press

Cardinal Bernard F. Law of Boston kissing the hand of Pope John Paul II yesterday before the cardinals' meeting in the private papal library in the Vatican. The pope greeted each cardinal by name.



Associated Press

Cardinal Theodore W. McCarrick of Washington after the meeting with the pope. The cardinal said the session covered several sensitive topics.

"He said if he had not made some terrible mistakes we would not be here," Cardinal George recounted. "He did not speak about resignation, and nobody asked him about it."

Nor will anyone else ask at this point, Cardinal McCarrick said. "We've passed that point in the discussions," he said. "The time for that would have been at the beginning. We're over that."

On Monday, The Los Angeles Times quoted an anonymous American cardinal as saying he and several others would push Cardinal Law to resign at the meetings. Other American cardinals also suggested on Monday that cardinals seemed

split on the issue, though several said today that there now appeared to be no move to take up the issue this week.

Cardinal Mahony is the lone American cardinal who has in the past been openly critical of Cardinal Law's handling of abuse cases. When asked in an interview today whether he was the cardinal quoted in his hometown newspaper, Cardinal Mahony said:

"I don't know where that's coming from. These 'highly placed sources say' stories always scare me."

"I would be the last one" to push for his resignation, he said of Cardinal Law, adding:

"I am 3,000 miles away from Boston. Decisions about his future are completely out of my hands."

Several people at the meeting said the pope's message came through forcefully in his speech.

"I never heard him speak in such strong terms condemning sex abuse of minors by the clergy," Cardinal Anthony J. Bevilacqua of Philadelphia said. "He had some pretty strong words about the clergy."

John Paul also made clear that he saw the problem in part as a crisis of leadership. "Because of the great harm done by some priests and religious, the church herself is viewed with distrust, and many are offended at the way in which the church's leaders are perceived to have acted in this matter," the pope said.

He also called sexual abuse "a grave symptom of a crisis" that affects society as a whole.

"It is a deep-seated crisis of sexual morality, even of human relationships, and its prime victims are the family and the young," he said. "In addressing the problem of abuse with clarity and determination, the church will help society to understand and deal with the crisis in its midst."

Cardinals said they did not feel scolded by the pope, but were clear that the Vatican officials were listening to Americans and would expect them to solve their own problems.

"He's not happy that we made the mistakes, but he understands how we could have arrived at them," Cardinal McCarrick said. "Now it's our responsibility to put this spiritual message from him into practice. The holy father has said to the bishops, 'O.K., now do something.'"

German Church to Study Guidelines

By The New York Times

BERLIN, April 23 — Catholic bishops here agreed today to form a commission to study guidelines on clergy sex abuse of minors. The German church has left it up to each diocese to deal with priests accused of molestation and has no national data on offenders.