

The story behind the pope's meeting with sex abuse victims; Cardinal O'Malley interview

John L. Allen Jr. | Apr. 25, 2008 All Things Catholic

Prior to Pope Benedict XVI's visit to the United States, some handlers worried that the American media would impose the sexual abuse crisis as the trip's dominant storyline. As it turns out, those fears were misplaced -- the media didn't impose the crisis upon the pope, he imposed it on us.

During a papal trip, the Vatican press corps gathers early each day, usually around 5 a.m., to receive advance copies of that day's speeches. Saturday morning in New York, waiting outside the room where the speeches would be handed out, I bumped into a prominent Italian *vaticanista* who actually grumbled that it would have been better if the pope had given one substantial speech on the crisis, rather than scattering his references across several days. This journalist said he had come prepared to write about several topics, but as it was, four of his five stories so far had led with the sexual abuse crisis -- because, he said, the pope himself kept bringing it up.

Certainly Benedict's five public references to the crisis, beginning with his lengthy answer to my question [aboard the papal plane](#) [1] on April 15, were destined to keep the story in the headlines. Yet his most dramatic gesture actually came off-camera, in a private encounter with [five survivors of sexual abuse](#) [2] at the hands of Catholic priests. That session took place on Thursday, April 17, in the chapel of the nunciature, or Vatican embassy, in Washington, D.C.

As obvious and long overdue a step as that meeting may seem to some, this was one of those moments in history that could just as easily not have happened. In light of opposition from both the Vatican and some quarters of the American hierarchy, insiders insist that the meeting was a personal decision of Pope Benedict XVI, not a mere formality placed on his schedule by advisors.

In this column, I'll develop three aspects of the story: the chronology of how the meeting came about; the opposition to it; and its long-term significance. On Wednesday of this week, I also had the opportunity to discuss the meeting with Cardinal Sean O'Malley of Boston, a driving force in making it happen. Our conversation appears below.

Chronology

Almost from the beginning of the sexual abuse crisis in the Catholic church, there have been demands that the

pope take a more personal role, including meeting with victims. For many, the fact that neither John Paul II nor Benedict XVI had ever met with victims was seen as a symbol that the Vatican was out of touch, or in denial, about the gravity of the problem.

In March 2003, three victims from Boston came to Rome in an attempt to meet with the pope. One was Bernie McDaid, who was among the five to meet Pope Benedict XVI on April 17. Though the three victims did not meet John Paul on that occasion, they did meet with Msgr. James Green, then head of the English desk in the Secretariat of State. (Green is today the papal nuncio in South Africa.)

Green brought a message from John Paul II: "The Holy Father realizes the seriousness of this problem, and is doing all he can," the victims said Green told them, adding that they were free to share the message with other survivors. "He will continue to do all he can to heal the church and to pray for the victims. He will see that this doesn't happen again."

While the victims involved said that message was of some consolation, desire for a direct meeting with the pope never went away.

Those hopes were revived one year ago, when the Secretary General of the United Nations, Ban Ki-Moon, invited Pope Benedict XVI to address the General Assembly in 2008. As it became clear that the pope intended to visit the United States this spring, O'Malley wrote the pope to urge him to put Boston on his itinerary, in part so that he could meet with victims and promote healing from the sexual abuse crisis.

O'Malley learned in November, during the U.S. bishops' fall meeting in Baltimore, that the pope's itinerary in the States would include only Washington and New York. He wrote again, this time along with the bishops of the province, asking the pope to reconsider. Once again the answer came back no, on the grounds that given the pope's age, a third stop in America was impractical.

At that stage, O'Malley penned a personal appeal to the pope, asking him to meet with victims at another point along his itinerary. In late February, Benedict wrote a personal letter to O'Malley saying that he wanted to meet with victims in Washington, and asking him to put together a group of five people. The pope's letter indicated that the meeting was to be pastoral, private and personal.

From that point, O'Malley asked Fr. John Connolly and Barbara Thorp of the Boston archdiocese, both of whom have long experience in working with survivors, to help him organize the meeting. Roughly three weeks ago, the victims were called, one by one, and asked to meet on the last Wednesday and Thursday in March to discuss the idea of seeing the pope. Each agreed to participate in the meeting. Shortly before departure for Washington, all five met in the rectory of Holy Cross Cathedral in Boston for pizza with O'Malley, Connolly and Thorp. In part, this was a "getting to know you" session, since only two of the victims, McDaid and Olan Horne, knew one another prior to this experience. The group was also briefed on what to expect in terms of Vatican protocol.

In part because the Vatican insisted on confidentiality before the fact, O'Malley and his aides opted to reach out to survivors whom they knew, and who they felt would honor the need for discretion. At the same time, they also thought it was important to avoid impressions of "hand-picking" survivors who would be non-confrontational. Partly for that reason, two of the five survivors who took part, McDaid and Horne, have a track

record of being publicly critical of the church's response to the crisis.

Three days before the meeting, McDaid contacted me to alert me of what was in the works. (I had profiled McDaid back in 2003 during his trip to Rome.) I made both the *National Catholic Reporter* and CNN aware of the plans, so that we could prepare our coverage. At least two other media organizations also had advance knowledge of the meeting, National Public Radio and *The Boston Globe*. All agreed to wait until the meeting had taken place to make it public.

The Vatican spokesperson, Fr. Federico Lombardi, issued a statement immediately after the meeting broke up on April 17, which was delivered via e-mail to members of the Vatican press corps. In a sign of sensitivity to the survivors, Lombardi agreed to delete a reference to the exact number who met with the pope from the statement; in the end, however, the number (five) became public record when the survivors themselves confirmed it.

Due to my relationship with McDaid, the three survivors who decided to speak publicly about their encounter with the pope did so for the first time on television on CNN, just three hours after the meeting ended. Video of that interview with McDaid, Horne, and Faith Johnston can be found here: ['Unfiltered access' to pope](#) [3].

I was in contact with McDaid and Horne leading up to the meeting, so I know something of the pressures the survivors faced. For one thing, the two who did not wish to go public were aware that publicity surrounding the meeting might result in disclosure of their identities and their personal stories. (To date, that hasn't happened). All five knew that other survivors, including organized survivor groups, would likely be critical, suggesting that the meeting was a publicity stunt and that the five victims were playing into the church's hand. To some extent the victims were also rattled by the church's insistence upon confidentiality, since demands for secrecy were a central element of the pattern of abuse they had suffered in the first place. The survivors also knew there would be massive press interest; the night the three appeared on CNN, for example, producers from other television programs camped outside the network's Washington bureau hoping to pounce on them when they exited.

Despite those strains, by most accounts all five held up remarkably well. As Johnston put it, "We are no longer just 'victims' -- the Holy Father now sees us as individuals who have survived terrible physical, emotional, and spiritual abuse."

Opposition

From an American point of view, the meeting with survivors may seem an obvious step in crisis management, with the only real question being why it took so long to arrange. Seen from within, however, it's a story of the pope making a decision against some fairly powerful currents of opinion both in the Vatican and in some sectors of the American hierarchy.

From the Vatican side, anxiety about the American legal system has long created pressure against anything that might smack of an admission of guilt.

At present, the Holy See is protected from civil liability in American courts by the Foreign Sovereign Immunity Act of 1976, which bars action against foreign governments, but creates exceptions when those governments are

engaged in "non-sovereign activities" such as commercial enterprises. To date, some lower courts in the United States have allowed actions against the Holy See to proceed on the basis of those exceptions. To date no such ruling has held up on appeal, but this remains a nightmare scenario for some Vatican officials.

Such concern was behind a request made by the Vatican's then-Secretary of State Cardinal Angelo Sodano, at the time the most powerful Vatican official after the pope himself, to U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice in a Feb. 8, 2005, meeting. [Sodano asked Rice](#) [4] for an intervention by the State Department in a sex abuse lawsuit in Kentucky, where the Holy See had been named as a defendant.

On that basis, some Vatican officials took a dim view of the idea of the pope speaking openly about the crisis in the United States, or meeting with victims, on the grounds that it could provide fresh ammunition for civil attorneys to come after the Holy See as a "co-conspirator."

Reservations were also voiced from the American side. In February, several American bishops discussed the upcoming visit, and at least one cardinal expressed reservations about both the meeting and the broader idea of the pope speaking at length about the sexual abuse crisis.

According to two sources who were involved in that meeting, this cardinal argued that the crisis should not be played up to such an extent that it would overshadow other aspects of Pope Benedict's message and activity. He also suggested that because the crisis varied in intensity across the country, making it into a national story during the pope's time in the United States would risk exaggerating its true dimensions.

In the event, however, O'Malley told *NCR* that some of those opposed to the meeting came around after it took place.

"One bishop came up to me and said, quite gratuitously, 'I want to apologize to you. I had opposed all this, and you were right, it needed to happen,'" O'Malley said.

Given the opposition expressed both in Rome and in the United States, observers such as O'Malley say the fact that the meeting happened reflects a personal choice of Pope Benedict XVI. Among other things, those close to the pope point to his experience as prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, where since 2001 he had responsibility for the canonical dimension of the crisis. In that capacity, he read all the case files of alleged acts of abuse, including extensive transcripts of survivor testimony -- more so, sources say, than most American bishops. Sources say that the then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger was deeply affected by the experience, in part explaining his dramatic reference to "filth" in the church in the 2005 Good Friday meditations he penned for Pope John Paul II.

Significance

The first word about the meaning of the encounter should belong to the survivors themselves. Horne said he was struck by the way Benedict opened the session with the magic words, "I'm sorry."

"I didn't think I needed an apology. I thought I had heard them, and they rang hollow," Horne said on CNN just after the meeting. "But there's a great sense of hope that came here. There's a great new bell that has been rung, as far as I'm concerned. I'm hearing something that I have never heard."

Johnston seemed equally moved.

"I hope and pray that other survivors will gain hope and strength from this," she said to me recently. "For the first time in years, I feel proud to be a Catholic."

This is not to suggest that these five survivors, or others, are naïve about the magnitude of the challenge that remains. McDaid, for one, pointedly told the pope that "there's a cancer growing on your ministry." Yet all five also seem to feel that an important corner was turned.

Other survivors and critics insist that papal words and gestures will ring hollow until they're matched by equally compelling actions. In an April 17 interview with CNN, for example, David Clohessy of the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests called for Benedict to extend the "zero tolerance" policy of the American bishops to the universal church, and for at least a couple of American bishops associated with the crisis to be fired.

Neither measure seems especially likely, at least in the short term. Canon lawyers in Rome and other parts of the world have long objected to central elements of the American policies, arguing that they violate the due process rights of accused priests and depart from the church's tradition of granting discretion to superiors to make the punishment fit the crime. That debate seems far from resolved. Demands to fire bishops likewise run headlong into Catholic theology of the episcopal office, which sees a bishop not as a corporate manager but as a father. On this model, a family doesn't fire its members when things go wrong.

In the weeks and months to come, much legitimate discussion will surround the policy implications of the pope's blunt talk. None of that, however, should obscure what seem the two most obvious consequences of what we saw and heard from Benedict XVI during his April 15-20 trip.

First, for anyone tempted to regard the sexual abuse crisis as a closed chapter, Benedict laid waste to that notion. In his April 19 homily at St. Patrick's Cathedral, the pope referred to the "continuing challenges that this situation presents." That's a deliberately chosen word, suggesting that the healing and reconciliation to which he repeatedly referred is far from an accomplished fact.

Second, Benedict has set a new standard for candor. The old stereotype of the Church in times of crisis was to deny, to minimize the problem, and to react defensively. To some extent, of course, this was precisely a stereotype, and many Church officials don't fit that bill. Nonetheless, it was true often enough to keep the image alive.

In just six days, Benedict made that way of reacting to problems far more difficult to justify. When a new crisis erupts in the future -- and one inevitably will -- if someone in Catholic officialdom refuses to address it

honestly, I suspect a vast chorus will arise: "Why can't you be more like the pope?"

In the Catholic world, that's a pretty difficult kind of pressure to resist.

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On Wednesday, I spoke by phone with Cardinal Sean O'Malley of Boston about the pope's meeting with survivors. The following is a transcript of our conversation.

I've had the opportunity to speak at length with three of the survivors about what this meeting meant to them. You've spent a great deal of time with victims during your career as a bishop. What did the meeting mean to you?

I was very anxious for the Holy Father to be able to have an encounter with victims, both for the sake of the victims and for his own sake. For the last 15 years I have been meeting with victims in different dioceses. It's very difficult because of all the pain people bring to these meetings, but I have found it to be a very important exercise.

I was so pleased that the day we met, the Holy Father made reference in his homily in Nationals Park to the importance of pastoral care for those who have been affected by sexual abuse by the clergy. That afternoon, he demonstrated how that care must be given -- by personal contact, listening to them, consoling them.

I've always considered it a very important meeting. When it was decided that the Holy Father would not come to Boston, I requested that he look for another opportunity to have this direct meeting with victims. I felt it was very important for the victims and for the American church.

Many would say this meeting was long overdue. Why do you think it's taken so long for a pope to sit down with victims?

This was the first trip of the Holy Father to the United States since the time of the crisis. I can only speculate why it's taken until this point. I also think there were voices out there telling the Holy Father that he shouldn't do it. That's why I was so pleased that he made this decision. Obviously the number of statements he made on the subject demonstrates his realization of how important this is. It's not behind us, and we have to address it. He obviously wasn't worried that by addressing it, he would diminish the other initiatives or themes of this trip. He demonstrated quite clearly how important he sees this to be.

The pope spoke about the crisis publicly five times, plus the meeting with victims, amounting to one reference to the crisis for every day he was in the country. Were you surprised by how often and how forcefully he addressed it?

I did not expect him to say as much as he did, and I was delighted.

Why do you think he took it on so directly?

I really don't know. Certainly his experience at the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith exposed him to some of this. I would hope that his conversations he may have had with the nuncio and the bishops here would

have helped him to realize how important it is for the church to address the issue of sexual abuse.

Beyond that, I think that he is a profoundly pastoral person. He has a pastor's heart. Some people look at this in terms of the economic damage and so on, but I think he looks at the spiritual damage that has been done by the crisis. I think that's what concerns him the most -- the damage to the victims, to the clergy, and to the faithful in general.

You mentioned voices telling the pope not to do this. What were they saying?

I suppose people were afraid that the sexual abuse crisis would eclipse every other aspect of his visit. I have to say, though, that when it took place, some minds were changed. After the meeting with the pope, one bishop came up to me and said, quite gratuitously, 'I want to apologize to you. I had opposed all this, and you were right, it needed to happen.'

This is why I was so relieved that the meeting was not made public ahead of time. It would have turned into a circus, and it may very well never have happened.

This was Pope Benedict's first meeting with victims. Can you think back to your first encounter with victims and talk about what affect it had on you?

It certainly makes it a human problem. It's not something that's theoretical or fictional. You see the suffering in the person's face, listen to their story, and realize how much suffering has been caused by this.

I first met with victims when I went to Fall River [Massachusetts] in 1992, the [Fr. James] Porter victims, and there were scores of them. Unfortunately, the case there broke when there was no bishop in Fall River to deal with it. By the time I got there, it was already unraveling. Very quickly, I started meeting with victims. It was a very difficult and painful thing, in so many ways. You know, I had been in the West Indies for 10 years, where our problems were many, but not sexual abuse. I sometimes jokingly say, "Give me a good hurricane any day!"

Did you have a chance to talk to the pope afterwards about what this meant to him?

Yes, we had dinner the next night at the nunciature in New York. He told me how happy he was for the meeting, how moved he had been by it. I think he was affected by it. You could tell just by the expression on his face, his voice, and the tenderness with which he spoke to each of these victims.

When and how did the idea of the meeting first originate?

Almost immediately after we learned that the Holy Father was not going to come to Boston, in November, I wrote a letter along with the bishops of the province asking him to reconsider. We gave all the reasons why we thought he should come to this region. It was very much around the whole question of the sexual abuse crisis and the need for healing. When the Holy See responded that there was just too much on the Holy Father's plate to add another stop, I certainly understood that. I'm amazed at the stamina he exhibited on this trip at 81 years of age.

After we got that second no, I then wrote back personally asking for a meeting with the victims. The Holy Father then wrote to me and said he wanted to meet with them in Washington, and it went on from there. This was maybe six weeks or two months ago.

Do you believe this was a personal choice of the pope?

I'm convinced of that. I think there were a lot of people telling him not to do it.

A great deal of momentum has been built up by the pope's words and gestures on the crisis while in the United States. Where do things go from here?

I'm hoping that it will lead us on paths of healing. The church in the United States has tried, I think, desperately to address and to make amends for this crisis, for these terrible crimes which have been committed. I think we've done a lot to make our Catholic schools and agencies and parishes the safest place possible for children. We need to redouble those efforts, and to continue to invite other people who are truly concerned about the safety of children to be our allies.

I'm hoping that people will begin to contextualize this problem. What happened in the church was terrible, and certainly the church should be held to a higher standard. Nevertheless, this is a human problem. No other institution in the United States has done as much to address this problem as the Catholic church has. We're far from meeting our goals, but those efforts need to be of some comfort to the victims and to the Catholic community itself.

You know well that some critics, including some survivors, say that they won't take much comfort from the church's response until a few bishops are fired. How do you respond to that?

It's very difficult. Certainly the fact that Cardinal [Bernard] Law is no longer the bishop in Boston is an indication that at times bishops have been held accountable. But the church is not a corporation; the paradigm is much more one of a family. You don't fire your father or grandfather. If people can see the church as the church, rather than as an agency or a corporation, then there can be other ways of healing this.

Certainly the relationship between bishops and the Holy See is complicated, and it has ecumenical repercussions too. The Eastern churches are always looking to see how bishops fare in the Western church in their relationship with the pope.

In general, I know that people do want to see some sort of accountability. How it should be done, I don't know. I'm not going to second-guess the Holy Father. Certainly in Boston, the archbishop tendered his resignation, it was accepted, and I think that was appropriate.

Are you saying we still need conversation about accountability mechanisms?

These conversations are on-going. I don't know what will come out of them. It's not my decision; it's really the Holy Father's. He has a much broader view of what the needs of the church are. Obviously, however, he's acutely aware of how important this issue is in the United States.

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