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Benedict's record on abuse: all talk and no action

David Clohessy | Mar. 19, 2010

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Commentary

As disclosures of carefully concealed clergy sex crimes surface by the hundreds across Europe, even in Pope Benedict's native Germany, defenders of the pontiff are working overtime.

"As pope, he has been unusually and laudably aggressive in dealing with abusers," says David Gibson, author of a Benedict biography.

"[On abuse] Pope Benedict XVI has made it clear that no one, however well-connected, gets a free pass," writes John Allen of *National Catholic Reporter*.

Well, let's look clearly at Benedict's track record, as pope, on clergy sex crimes and cover ups. He has done three things.

Once, after substantially watering down an already vague and weak proposal, he belatedly and begrudgingly approved the U.S. bishops' 2002 child sex abuse policy.

Twice, in carefully choreographed circumstances, he sat in the same room with and talked with a few hand-picked victims.

And twice, he "disciplined" credibly accused child molesting clerics (one of whom, after multiple allegations and years of delay, was "invited" to live a life of prayer while the Vatican made only the most oblique reference to his actual crimes).

That's it. That's all. Everything else is just talk.

Well, words are powerful, aren't they? Of course, but words are what we use when we're powerless. And with pedophile priest and complicit bishops, the pope is anything but powerless.

When it comes to world peace, hunger, inequality, poverty, AIDS, natural disasters, the pope talks and writes, as

he should. He has little, if any, influence over these catastrophes.

But with clergy sex crimes and cover ups, he sits atop a clear, ancient, rigid, hierarchical structure. He's the king, and has nearly limitless power.

But in the greatest crisis the church has faced in modern times, Benedict acts not like a mighty monarch, but like a lowly serf.

Keep in mind that Benedict and his colleagues in Rome have dealt with this scandal for decades. There's really nothing new happening, except victims are predictably speaking out in more nations now than before. But none of this, despite bishops' claims of being "shocked" in recent weeks, is the least bit shocking or surprising.

So we've got veteran, knowledgeable leaders facing an ancient, predictable problem. Action then, should be swift and effective.

But action is nearly nowhere to be seen. Just words -- excuses, explanations, defenses, attacks, and apologies.

Action, of course, protects kids. Words protect no one. A seemingly-endless flurry of disclosures and revelations and exposes and headlines have emerged in Denmark, Germany, Italy, Switzerland, Austria, Ireland and the Netherlands over the past few weeks. But not a single edict has been issued or action has been taken that leaves one child safer as a result.

[David Clohessy is the national director of SNAP, the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests [1].]

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[1] http://www.snapnetwork.org/