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Bishops voice concern for abuse victims, praise pope's leadership

by Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON -- Leaders of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops voiced concern for victims of clergy sexual abuse while offering praise for Pope Benedict XVI's long-standing leadership in dealing with abuse cases.

In a Holy Week statement issued March 30, members of the Executive Committee of the USCCB said they are aware of the pope's concern for abuse victims and "how he has strengthened the church's response to victims."

Committee members also acknowledged Pope Benedict's support for efforts within the U.S. Catholic Church on behalf of victims as well as the steps taken to deal with perpetrators of abuse.

The letter was sent by Cardinal Francis E. George of Chicago, USCCB president; Bishop Gerald F. Kicanas of Tucson, Ariz., vice president; Bishop George V. Murry of Youngstown, Ohio, secretary; Archbishop Joseph E. Kurtz of Louisville, Ky., treasurer; and Bishop Arthur J. Serratelli of Paterson, N.J., an elected member of the committee.

The committee said recent revelations of sexual abuse by clergy "saddens and angers the church and causes us shame."

"If there is anywhere that children should be safe it should be in their homes and in the church," the bishops said.

In recent weeks hundreds of new sex abuse allegations against priests and other church personnel have surfaced in Ireland, Germany, the Netherlands, Austria and Switzerland.

The Executive Committee members reiterated that bishops across the U.S. continue to "respond with compassion to victims (and) survivors."

"We continue to intensify our efforts to provide safe environments for children in our parishes and schools. Further, we work with others in our communities to address the prevalence of sexual abuse in the larger society," the bishops said.

"With the support of both Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI, we bishops have made a vigorous commitment to do everything in our power to prevent abuse from happening to children," they said.

The bishops added that the U.S. church continues to screen church workers and volunteers who work with children and young people, provide child abuse awareness and prevention training, report suspected abuse to police and participate in an annual audit as a way to hold local dioceses accountable for their efforts in protecting children and young people.

In 2002 the U.S. bishops adopted their "Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People," which mandates safe environment programs be set up in dioceses and parishes and requires an annual audit on how dioceses and religious orders are complying with provisions in the charter.

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The bishops also recalled Pope Benedict's private meeting with abuse victims during his 2008 visit to Washington and how the pontiff listened intently as victims recounted their experiences.

"As we accompany Christ in his passion and death during this Holy week, we stand with our Holy Father Pope Benedict XVI in prayer for the victims of sexual abuse, for the entire church and for the world," the bishops concluded.

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