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Victims of clergy abuse call for October summit in Rome

John L. Allen Jr. | Apr. 5, 2010

CNN anchor John Roberts, left, interviews priestly sexual abuse victims Bernie McDaid, Faith Johnson and Olan Horne April 18, 2008, about their private meeting with Pope Benedict XVI (CNS/courtesy of CNN)

Two of the five sex abuse victims who met Pope Benedict XVI during his April 2008 visit to the United States, and who pledged at the time to "hold his feet to the fire," have announced plans to stage a "Day of Reformation" for the Catholic church in Rome on Oct. 31, amid a mushrooming crisis which threatens to engulf the pope himself.

Bernie McDaid and Olan Horne, who met Benedict XVI on April 17, 2008 -- the first-ever meeting between a pope and survivors of sexual abuse -- said today that they intend to gather thousands of victims, along with church reform activists and ordinary "people in the pews," in Rome on Oct. 31. They're asking that Benedict XVI participate, and that the event be simulcast to Catholic churches around the world.

They also called on priests "who know in their hearts that their church is in dire need of change" to join them.

Whether or not Benedict XVI agrees, McDaid and Horne said the event will go forward. Both men told *NCR* they are working with reform groups around the world, particularly in Europe, to build support. McDaid said the target is to gather 50,000 people in St. Peter's Square.

"For the first time, the children of these crimes from all over the world can unite in one voice," McDaid and Horne said in a prepared statement released to media outlets this morning. "This will mark the day that the world could not deny this problem anymore. Then those in pain can stand up for themselves with no more shame, and begin to heal."

Horne told *NCR* that he also plans to offer a four-point platform for reform to church officials ahead of time, in hopes that the Oct. 31 event could become an occasion for the pope and other senior leaders to officially embrace it.

Those four points are:

- Regular independent audits of dioceses and other church bodies regarding their policies and procedures on preventing abuse and dealing with cases when they arise, with those audits mandated by Rome for the entire global church.
- Outreach to victims, including spiritual, pastoral, and mental health support. As part of that effort, Horne said the Vatican should create a "think tank" to study best practices and to make them official policy for the universal church.
- Effective screening programs for seminarians, priests and bishops, including enhanced opportunities for laity to participate in the selection of bishops. Education programs in sexual abuse should also be a mandatory element of formation for future priests around the world.
- Participation by sex abuse survivors in all policy-setting bodies, including national review boards and whatever review board for the global church the Vatican might create.

Horne said that for the most part these four points reflect policies already adopted by the Catholic church in the United States, but which are not yet binding for the church in other parts of the world.

McDaid and Horne said they selected Oct. 31 because it's already observed in Christian circles as Reformation Day, commemorating the Protestant Reformation. Both men said they're aware that the Vatican may balk at the term "reformation," given its historical associations, but they insisted that it's the right word for the sweeping changes they believe are required.

What's important, Horne said, is not the name of the event, but the "fundamental and systemic change" he believes is required.

McDaid said that he hopes the Vatican, and Pope Benedict XVI personally, grasp the magnitude of the crisis facing the Catholic church.

"I told the pope when I met him that you have a cancer in your flock, and you need to do something about it," McDaid said. "It's been two years now, and little has been done."

McDaid and Horne are from the Boston area, and both say they were abused by the same priest, Joseph Birmingham, who died in 1989. In addition to the 2008 meeting with the pope, McDaid also led a group of victims who came to Rome seeking a hearing in 2003, which ended with a meeting with a senior official in the Vatican's Secretariat of State.

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