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Abuse scandal painful, pope says

Cindy Wooden Catholic News Service | Apr. 15, 2010

Pope Benedict XVI attends his general audience in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican April 14. (CNS photo/Paul Haring)

VATICAN CITY -- Recognizing the sins of priests who have sexually abused children, performing penance and asking for forgiveness, the Catholic Church trusts that God will purify and transform the church, Pope Benedict XVI said.

"I must say that we Christians, even in recent times, have often avoided the word 'penance,' which seemed too harsh to us. Now, under the attacks of the world that speaks to us of our sins, we see that being able to do penance is a grace," the pope said April 15 in a homily during a Mass with members of the Pontifical Biblical Commission.

"We see how it is necessary to do penance, that is, to recognize what is mistaken in our life," he said during the morning Mass in the Pauline Chapel of the Apostolic Palace.

Audio clips and a transcript of part the pope's homily, delivered without a prepared text, were posted on the Vatican Radio Web site.

The pope said Christians know that "to open oneself to forgiveness, to prepare oneself for forgiveness, to allow oneself to be transformed, the pain of penance -- that is to say of purification and of transformation -- this pain is grace, because it is renewal, and it is the work of divine mercy."

In his homily, the pope also spoke about the liberating effect of obeying God, even in a world that likes to pretend that freedom means doing whatever the individual wants to do, but still insists on everyone conforming to what the majority believes and does.

Without a reference to God and to God's will for his creation, the final arbiter of right and wrong becomes majority rule or the dictates of the most powerful, he said.

"The Nazi dictatorship, the Marxist dictatorship" in the 1900s were examples of regimes that could not stand the idea of God's primacy, he said.

Fortunately, he said, such dictatorships do not exist today, but there are subtle forms of pressure on people to conform to a worldly opinion and not to God's will.

"A conformism under which it becomes obligatory to think as everyone thinks, to act as everyone acts, and the subtle or not so subtle aggression against the church demonstrate that this conformism really can become a real dictatorship," he said.

The reason Christians are called to obey God is because they want to enjoy eternal life, the pope said. Unfortunately today, Christians seem embarrassed to talk about the final judgment and eternal life, so instead they focus on the good works and solidarity faith inspires, he said.

The promise of eternal life is also the reason why it is a grace to be able to recognize one's sins, perform penance, ask pardon and know that God will bring forgiveness and healing, Pope Benedict said.

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