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Pope sets example in meeting with abuse victims

Carol Glatz Catholic News Service | Apr. 29, 2010

VATICAN CITY -- Bishops worldwide are encouraged to meet with victims of clerical sex abuse, just as Pope Benedict XVI has done, said the prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

"There is nothing that helps bishops or priests learn about this problem better than meeting with the victims and hearing their stories," U.S. Cardinal William J. Levada said in a televised interview April 27.

Pope Benedict XVI has met with victims several times, and "that's an example to bishops," he said.

The interview, which took place in the cardinal's Vatican office, aired on PBS' "The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer," and was to be one of a series of reports from the Vatican.

In the 14-minute interview, Cardinal Levada said he didn't want to "scapegoat anybody or have a conspiracy theory," but he thought there has been "a certain media bias" in the way media outlets have covered the sex abuse scandals.

Reports, especially by U.S. media, have largely relied on information coming from attorneys representing alleged abuse victims and, because of that, "have not been fair in giving a balanced picture, a picture in context," he said.

He said more media attention should be paid to the positive steps the church in the United States has taken to address its own sex abuse scandals.

The U.S. bishops in 2002 adopted landmark policies to address and prevent child sex abuse, which included the "Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People."

The cardinal said the Vatican-approved U.S. programs are "a real success story" that should serve as a model for other bishops' conferences as well as for public schools and organizations that work with children.

The U.S. bishops took "very concrete action" and "I think that the United States can rightly offer a model," he said.

He said that while sex abuse occurs in other environments, members of the church "should hold ourselves to a higher standard, in the sense that this is not something that one would have expected" because a priest is ordained to be a good shepherd of his flock."

Concerning the recent resignation of bishops over their handling of sex abuse cases, Cardinal Levada said he would not be surprised if there were more resignations to follow. He said the standard by which bishops are expected to address clerical sex abuse is "not new, but it's being applied more rigorously than in the past."

"I will look forward to helping my brother bishops around the world see what can be done if you take good concrete steps, put things out on the table, make sure that you've got a program to educate your priests and

screen for any problem areas as you are admitting priests and have a good program for (a) safe environment," he said.

"I think those are key things that make our people feel secure" and such procedures "should be something that can be done throughout the church," he said.

The Vatican posted online in mid-April a summary of the Vatican's procedures for handling sex abuse allegations against priests, which were adopted in the wake of a 2001 papal document that established strict universal norms for handling such cases and placed these cases under the authority of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

Cardinal Levada said publishing the summary online was done because "it seemed good to put this in writing and at least put it as guidance for bishops" as well as to answer the general public's questions about what the church's rules were and what bishops were required to do.

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