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Jesuit expert calls Benedict 'great reformer' on sex abuse

John L. Allen Jr. | Feb. 16, 2013 NCR Today
Benedict Resigns
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One difficulty in assessing the legacy of Pope Benedict XVI on the sexual abuse crisis is that the people making the assessments tend to know more about one end of the equation than the other. That is, they?re either papal observers struggling to make sense of the scandals, or people on the front lines of the scandals trying to understand the pope.

A rare figure with deep expertise in both is Jesuit Fr. Hans Zollner, the academic vice-rector of the Jesuit-run Gregorian University in Rome and head of its Institute of Psychology.

On the papal side, Zollner was born in the Bavarian city of Regensburg, more or less the hometown of Pope Benedict XVI, and holds degrees in philosophy and theology from the University of Regensburg where the future pope once taught. In Rome, he?s had a front-row seat for the last part of Benedict?s tenure at the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and the almost eight years of his papacy.

In terms of understanding the dynamics of abuse, Zollner?s credentials are equally impressive. He was licensed as a psychologist and psychotherapist in 2004, and in 2010 and 2011 he served as a member of the scientific working group of the ?Round Table on Child Abuse? created by Germany?s federal government.

Zollner has studied the church?s rocky history on the issue at length, publishing the 2010 book *Chiesa e pedofilia. Una ferita aperta. Un approccio psicologico-pastorale* (?The Church and Pedophilia ? An Open Wound: A Psychological and Pastoral Approach?), along with fellow Jesuit Fr. Giovanni Cucci.

In 2012, Zollner was chair of the organizing committee for a major international summit on the sex abuse crisis held at the Gregorian, and co-sponsored by several Vatican departments. Among other things, that summit marked the debut of a ?Center for Child Protection? and an e-learning curriculum for church practitioners, intended to distill ?best practices? in preventing abuse, detecting it when it occurs, responding to it in terms of civil and canon law, and reaching out to victims.

On Feb. 15, Zollner sat down for an interview with NCR to discuss Benedict?s record and the fallout from last?s year summit.

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Now that Benedict XVI is stepping down, how do you evaluate his legacy on the sexual abuse scandals?

Based on what I know personally, at the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith he was the first person, and the most determined person, to take on what he called the ?open wound? in the body of the church, meaning the sexual abuse of minors by clergy. He came to know about a number of cases, and the intensity of the wounds inflicted on victims. He became aware of what priests had done to minors, and to vulnerable adults. As a result,

he became more and more convinced that it has to be tackled, and at various levels he started to deal with it ? the canonical level, the ecclesial, and the personal.

Benedict XVI is the first pope who has met with and listened to abuse victims, who has apologized, and who has written about the problem both in his letter to Irish bishops and in the book *Light of the World*.

One very important step was to concentrate all the legal and administrative procedures at the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. Another was to appoint a very intelligent, practical and dedicated man as Promoter of Justice.

You?re talking about Monsignor Charles Scicluna, now Bishop Scicluna in Malta?

Yes, Monsignor Scicluna, who was in that job for ten years. Now he?s appointed Father Robert Oliver [of the Boston archdiocese], which shows his resolution to go on ? to do justice to the victims, to hold abusers within the church accountable, and to whatever can be done to promote prevention.

We had enormous support for the symposium on abuse last February by all the heads of the major offices in the Roman Curia ? the Doctrine of the Faith, Propaganda Fide, Bishops, Education, the Secretariat of State. The Secretary of State wrote a letter to participants in which he quotes the pope. If you understand how Rome functions, all this could not have happened if there wasn?t a *placet* from above.

Other voices notwithstanding, and despite the bad image some people have created of the pope both as prefect and as Holy Father, he has been the most determined person to take this on. He?s been very encouraging for many people, including ourselves, to really face the issues and to try to do whatever can done to make sure that this evil within the church is acknowledged and is avoided as much as possible in the future.

You believe Benedict XVI will be remembered as a great reformer on the sex abuse front?

Yes, I do.

How do you explain his negative image?

Based on what I?ve read recently in the German newspapers, even in those that are rather critical of the church, all of them unanimously acknowledge that he was forced to face a crisis rooted in cases that often go back up to fifty or sixty years. Both in the last years of John Paul II and in his papacy, Benedict XVI was dealing with something that had lingered for decades. Unfortunately, he was made responsible for something that came to a broader public light in the last ten years or so, but it predates him. He got a bad image probably because people didn?t know how far back these cases went, and it was not communicated well enough how much he?s done to clean out the stables. He was the most important person in this.

Why do you think that story is so hard to tell?

Probably because his public image as prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith got in the way. It was so opposite to who he really is. Whoever has worked with him, whoever has encountered him personally, as we did two weeks ago when we presented the proceedings of the symposium to him, knows that he?s the most humble, most sensitive person. He?s very much aware of who?s in front of him, so he really takes the individual into account. That?s so contrary to the public image of the ?panzer cardinal? and so on ? a very rigid, conservative person. He has his convictions, but he?s much more open-minded.

He encountered the Jesuit professors here at the Gregorian in 2006, and he made a statement that was so profoundly encouraging to develop theology. I was there in 2008 when he addressed the Jesuit General

Congregation members, made up of 220 Jesuits, and some of them were fairly apprehensive. He gave a brilliant talk which took many of us by surprise because of its openness, and its deep understanding of the needs of the church today. He praised Fr. [Pedro] Arrupe, he praised our work for social justice, he gave credit to the Jesuit Refugee Service, he singled out the pioneering work of dialogue with culture of Matteo Ricci, and he called us to go to the frontiers, acknowledging that going there means being at the edge, in difficulties, and not always having the right answer. It was both deeply consoling and challenging.

The public image and the reality are just so different. For instance, bishops with a story of scandals, most of them personal, have been asked to step down. That?s happened in Europe, in Latin America, in Africa, and in other places.

One of the reasons it?s tough to style Benedict as a reformer, at least in the United States, is precisely because the perception is that bishops have not been held accountable. We have a bishop in Kansas City who pled guilty to not reporting suspected child abuse, Cardinal Bernard Law of Boston received a position in Rome, and now Cardinal Roger Mahony is on his way to the conclave despite having been relieved of administrative and public duties by his successor. What about accountability for bishops?

I know this is a constant question from American journalists and the public. I was there when Monsignor Scicluna responded to your question on this point at the symposium last year.

He said we need greater accountability mechanisms for bishops.

Yes, the question really is not resolved. It?s complicated to work out clear procedures, partly because civil law and church law often don?t coincide in many instances and in many countries. We?ve tried to promote understanding of this point, but I know it?s hard to do. The civil law in the United States on these issues, for instance, is not the law in other countries. What your people ask for may not be what Germans, or Italians, or Malaysians, would ask for, and so it?s hard to arrive at a common standard [of accountability] for the entire world.

Obviously, we have to think about how accountability for bishops can be put in place, clearly and recognizably. Despite its hierarchical nature, the church actually doesn?t have clear procedures for some of these issues. For instance, the role of the bishops? conference [in enforcing accountability] is not clear, the role of the Metropolitan is not clear.

I was a bit surprised by Monsignor Scicluna?s reply to you, because he seemed to suggest that it all goes back to the pope. The poor pope can?t possibly deal with every one of these situations. There have to be intermediate steps, and these are not yet in place. That?s probably true not only of the church, but of many other institutions. Who?s responsible for a teacher who abuses a child in a school? Is it the principal, the superintendent, the regional administrator, the minister for education in that country?

In American lawsuits, they would probably all be named.

That?s not the case in Europe, where the fault in civil law lies with the single person.

It?s not only a question of how we deal with sex abuse cases and the responsibility of the superior or the bishops. There are also other situations, such as financial misconduct, physical abuse, and various kinds of scandals. It?s not dealt with adequately in church law, and the picture is very complex.

Both in the church and in society, people have learned a lot in the past ten years in terms of developing protocols and systems to ensure child safety, and are moving in the right direction, although there remains much still to be done. But Benedict XVI should be given the credit for taking important institutional first steps.

The symposium a year ago seemed to send a signal that the Vatican and Rome was trying to gets its hands around the issue. One year later, what have the fruits been?

The major fruit is that around the world, church leaders at various levels and the faithful have come to a much higher awareness and sensitivity. More people are coming to understand that abuse at the hands of priests has happened in all countries and other church employees, as in other institutions. There?s a growing conviction that we can?t tolerate this, we have to do whatever can be done to do justice to victims, we must stop the abusers and bring them to do justice, and we have to whatever we can to prevent these crimes.

Last weekend I was in Poland, giving some lectures to psychologists. A week before I arrived, a Dutch journalist living in Poland published a book in which he presents twelve interviews he did with victims of clerical abuse in Poland. One of my Polish Jesuit brothers said, ?You were right. I never believed this had happened in Poland, because if it had the Communists would have used it against us. Now I see that it?s true.? If that?s happening in Poland and other parts of Central and Eastern Europe, which has a very conservative church climate, and where people didn?t believe it could have happened because of their unique circumstances, it?s striking. The same thing is happening in Latin America. I?ve talking to the bishops? conferences and a wider public in Chile and Argentina in April. They get the point, and it tells me we?ve made a major step forward.

What about Asia and Africa?

It varies from country to country. In the Philippines they?re ahead of Eastern Europe. Much has been done, because of the public scandals there and because of the contact the bishops have with the United States. The cardinal of Manila is the best example. He?s given talks in the States on this issue, and he?s made it clear this is a major concern that has to be handled by the church in the Philippines. The same thing is true for Thailand, where abuse is rampant among sexual tourists there, and the church is the forefront of protecting children and women.

In Confucianist countries such as Korea and Japan, it is quite difficult to talk about sexual abuse publicly. We know from statistics that abuse in the family is a serious problem, but the church hasn?t really taken any public position. In India we?re working with 17 Jesuit provinces to fight the wider problem of child abuse, not just in the church. One government study in India, where the population obviously is mostly Hindu and Muslim, claims that fifty percent of young people are abused.

Africa, as both Monsignor Scicluna and Father Oliver have said, is far behind in many countries in setting up guidelines and acknowledging the problem. One challenge, and this is very hard to convey to a broader public, is the cultural differences. This is not the Anglo-Saxon legal system and puritanical moral system. In many African countries, for example, it?s normal to marry a girl at 14, 15 and 16, and to have children at that age. In Angola, there are initiation rites for boys at the age of 13 to 16. They stay in ?boy camps? for one to two years, where they?re introduced to sexuality, including what by our standards would include abuse. We have to understand a bit more what sexuality means for the peoples of Africa, and how they understand sexual interaction with minors. The civil law may be completely different from the practice. If the culture, or the tribe, or the family says that you marry at 16, then it doesn?t matter with the law says. Actually, that?s often true in India with the caste system.

In Kenya we?re working with the Malindi diocese on the east coast, which is a center for sexual tourism by Europeans and Americans. The bishop of Malindi, who?s a Maltese Capuchin, opened a help desk for the

victims of abuse in the family, through sexual tourism, and possibly also by priests. At the first conference organized by the Center for Child Protection in Munich, a Kenyan priest told us about a fourteen or fifteen-year-old boy who has two sisters, twelve and ten. They don?t have parents anymore because of AIDS. He sells his sisters to tourists so all three can survive. That kind of context helps us to understand the wider perspective in which the African church is trying to handle abuse cases. What does ?abuse? mean in that context?

Of course, some things are universal. If you violate the body, the mind and the freedom of a minor, that?s clearly abuse. The appropriate responses, however, are complicated, and we have to be aware that we?re far from having a ?one size fits all? response.

The archbishop of Tamale in Ghana was here two days ago. He?s a broad-minded man, with a degree in church history from Germany. He told me that the seminary now has problems they didn?t have thirty years ago. He wants to promote awareness, and this is where we think our approach can make a difference. He works together with UNICEF and other NGOs to fight abuse, which gives credit to the efforts of the church. It?s so different from the situation in some parts of Europe and North America; in Africa we can really help the victims speak out, to help stop the abuse, and to raise awareness that this is an important issue not just for the church but the entire society.

What?s another fruit?

One that will have important consequences has to do with the [anti-abuse] guidelines established by bishops? conferences, which the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith had requested be submitted for review and comment by June 2012. More than 75 percent of conferences have responded. Virtually every European country, all the countries in North and South America, and most Asian countries have sent them in. The bulk of the ones missing are in Africa, where there are 36 bishops? conferences. However, many of them sent representatives to the symposium, and they?ve at least begun to think about how to shape a set of guidelines for their situation.

Let?s remember that in countries such as Mali and Congo, there?s a war going on. Obviously, it?s hard to think about a set of guidelines in those circumstances. But we see the momentum even in these places, and I?m sure the Congregation for the Faith will continue to push. They?ll also get their observations back, and the congregation is being very clear.

How is the e-learning center going?

It?s going very well. We have funding for three years, so we can find out whether this platform can function in various languages, cultures and continents. The initial feedback is very good. The interest is exploding, from NGOs, political institutions, research institutes. We also want to do it in a scientifically rigorous way, so by the end of 2014 we should have something to present that?s sustainable.

How many church practitioners have made use of it?

At the moment, there are around 250 practitioners and 60 trainers involved, in the eight countries in which we are present at the moment.

What?s the future of the Center for Child Protection?

First of all, we want to consolidate the e-learning program, with everything that church practitioners need, and later on for others who want to join the program. The basics are how to recognize that a child possibly has been abused, how to act with the abuser, and what?s the correct civil and canon law. We have to be aware of the cultural issues, which will raise many questions.

We also want to develop the theological reflection on this issue, which has not had much development. There?s actually very little.

We also have to sort out how we can best promote and expand these efforts. Child protection is one concern, protection of vulnerable adults is another, and women?s rights are another. We need to think about how to combine them.

Also, we need to think about how to connect our program with other areas and resources. For instance, the Jesuit Refugee Service has a program that connects various Jesuit universities through e-learning programs. We could insert this one, and it has a wide reach. In India, for instance, the Jesuits have an immense network of schools. In Indonesia, the Jesuits have a university where the students are seventy to eighty percent Muslims. This opens up a totally new area, involving the Muslim community in this network and acknowledging what happens in the Muslim community.

You?re saying this is not just an exercise in crisis management, but a permanent commitment?

Surely, yes.

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