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Pope apologizes for 'unspeakable crimes' of sex abuse

by John L. Allen Jr.

NCR Today

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On day three of Pope Benedict XVI's four-day visit to the United Kingdom, the pontiff has once again used strong language on the sexual abuse crisis, expressing "deep sorrow to the innocent victims of these unspeakable crimes."

The pontiff said he feels "shame and humiliation" because of the scandals, and called upon Catholics to express "concern for the victims and solidarity with your priests."

It marks the second time Benedict has tackled the crisis since taking off on Thursday, when he told reporters aboard the papal plane he feels "sadness" that the church was "not sufficiently vigilant, and not sufficiently quick and decisive" in coming to grips with the scandal.

In trying to turn a corner on the crisis, Benedict faces a skeptical British public. A CNN survey conducted by the polling firm Comres just before the pope's arrival found that 77 percent of all British adults feel he hasn't done enough to punish abuser priests, along with 56 percent of British Catholics.

Celebrating a Mass at Westminster Cathedral, the seat of the Catholic church in England and Wales, Benedict said, "Here too I think of the immense suffering caused by the abuse of children, especially within the church and by her ministers."

"Above all, I express my deep sorrow to the innocent victims of these unspeakable crimes, along with my hope that the power of Christ's grace, his sacrifice of reconciliation, will bring deep healing and peace to their lives," Benedict said.

?I also acknowledge, with you, the shame and humiliation which all of us have suffered because of these sins; and I invite you to offer it to the Lord with trust that this chastisement will contribute to the healing of the victims, the purification of the Church and the renewal of her age-old commitment to the education and care of young people. I express my gratitude for the efforts being made to address this problem responsibly, and I ask all of you to show your concern for the victims and solidarity with your priests.?

Benedict is midway through his four-day visit to the United Kingdom, and so far there?s been no meeting with sex abuse victims. In keeping with its usual practice, the Vatican has declined to confirm whether a meeting will take place before Benedict returns to Rome Sunday evening.

In the meantime, debate over the pope?s role in the crisis continues, both in the press and in the streets. While Benedict spoke in Westminster Abbey yesterday, a Canadian human rights activist and Protestant minister, the Rev. Kevin Annett, told reporters that he hoped to serve the pontiff with a summons to appear before an international tribunal on the grounds that he is complicit in the cover-up of child sex abuse.

Yesterday the pope?s schedule was largely devoted to English society outside the Catholic church, meeting the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, and then delivering a keenly anticipated speech to the cream of the crop in British politics, including four former prime ministers. Benedict began this morning by meeting the current Prime Minister David Cameron, Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg, and opposition leader Harriet Harman.

That last meeting was seen as especially important, given that Harman was among the pioneers of an ?Equality Law? adopted under the former Labor government and criticized by the pope last February. The law contains strong provisions for gay rights, which some Catholics believe could compel church-run institutions and individual believers in public roles to violate church teaching.

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For the most part, however, day three of Benedict?s trip is for British Catholics.

In his homily this morning, Benedict reminded Catholics in England and Wales of the emphasis placed on the lay role in the church by Cardinal John Henry Newman, whom Benedict will beatify tomorrow in Birmingham.

The pope issued a special call for English laity to play an active role in politics and social affairs, asking them ?to work strenuously to defend those unchanging moral truths which, taken up, illuminated and confirmed by the Gospel, stand at the foundation of a truly humane, just and free society.?

Benedict also reflected on the difficulties of preaching the gospel in a secular world that often looks upon Christianity with jaded eyes.

?One of the greatest challenges facing us today is how to speak convincingly of the wisdom and liberating power of God?s word to a world which all too often sees the Gospel as a constriction of human freedom, instead of the truth which liberates our minds and enlightens our efforts to live wisely and well, both as individuals and as members of society,? he said.

Benedict also reminded English Catholics of their past as a sometimes persecuted minority following the 16th century English Reformation.

“Here in England, as we know, there were many who staunchly defended the Mass, often at great cost, giving rise to that devotion to the Most Holy Eucharist which has been a hallmark of Catholicism in these lands,” he said.

Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury, attended Benedict’s Mass this morning, and Benedict publicly thanked him for his presence. The two leaders were to meet again privately in a small room at Westminster Cathedral at the conclusion of the Mass. Also on hand was former Prime Minister Tony Blair, a convert to Catholicism, and his wife Cherie, a lifetime Catholic and graduate of Catholic schools.

Reflecting the robust democratic spirit of the U.K., opinions about how the pope’s trip are going seem to range widely.

Conservative politician and media personality Ann Widdecombe, a convert from Anglicanism to Catholicism, said the protesters were “melting away” as popular enthusiasm is growing. Yet Terry Sanderson, president of the National Secular Society, predicted that after Sunday “this trip will be completely forgotten,” because the vast majority of the British are “totally indifferent” to the pope’s presence and message.

Last night, the Vatican’s Secretary of State, Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, held a working dinner with the Foreign Minister of the U.K., William Hague. A joint statement afterwards said the two leaders discussed joint efforts to combat “hunger, diseases and illiteracy” and climate change, as well as promoting “the right to life, food, health and development for all.”

Reflecting a key theme of the pope’s message on this trip, the statement said that Bertone and Hague agreed upon “the essential role played by faith in the lives of individuals and as part of the fabric of a strong, generous, tolerant society.”

John Allen will be filing reports throughout the Papal visit to the U.K. Sept. 16-19. Stay tuned to NCR Today for updates.



Stories in this series on the papal visit to Scotland and England:

- Pope meets with sex abuse victims, by John L. Allen, Jr.
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- Pope apologizes for 'unspeakable crimes' of sex abuse, by John L. Allen, Jr.
- Joint statement on meeting between Pope and Archbishop of Canterbury
- Benedict in Britain: We get it, we've got it, let's share it, by John L. Allen, Jr.
- Pope calls on religions to defend environment, human life, by John L. Allen, Jr.
- Full text of pope's comments on the crisis, by John L. Allen, Jr.
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All this week in his Distinctly Catholic blog, Michael Sean Winters is interviewing a variety of Newman scholars:

- Fr. Joseph Komonchak, taught ecclesiology at Catholic University, wrote his dissertation on Newman
- Christopher Pramuk, Assistant professor of Theology at Xavier University in Cincinnati
- Ian Ker, Professor at Oxford University and author of a Newman biography
- The Very Reverend Richard Duffield, the Provost of the Birmingham Oratory
- Archbishop Vincent Nichols, the Archbishop of Westminster and Primate of England

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