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Benedict's in a box in talking about the crisis

John L. Allen Jr. | Sep. 18, 2010 NCR Today

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By now, declarations of papal contrition for the sex abuse crisis, such as that uttered by Benedict XVI this morning in Westminster Cathedral [1] on day three of his Sept. 16-19 trip to the United Kingdom, have become almost routine.

As always, it seems, familiarity breeds contempt. The pope?s critics are becoming increasingly acerbic in denouncing these words as hollow, while some of his friends are openly questioning the value of endless apologies.

The dilemma Benedict XVI will have to face is whether to keep talking about the crisis every time he travels, and if he does, how to do it in a way that?s constructive.

When Pope Benedict XVI tackled the crisis aboard the papal plane to the United States in 2008, saying he was ?deeply ashamed? and that ?we will do what is possible so this cannot happen again in the future,? it was big news. The pope raised the crisis four other times during his trip, earning credit for candor.

tA Gallup poll after the trip found that two-thirds of Americans said it had improved their image of the Catholic church, with most citing the pope?s meeting with victims of sexual abuse and his words on the crisis as the trip?s most important element.

tTwo years later, Benedict is once again visiting an English-speaking nation, and once again he?s spoken on the crisis multiple times. He responded to a question aboard the papal plane at the outset of his trip to the United Kingdom, and again today.

tWhat a difference two years makes.

While news agencies have reported the pope?s comments in the U.K., they haven?t made nearly the same splash. Indeed, increasingly the tendency among reporters is to nit-pick, looking for some wrinkle in the apology that might actually feed controversy. That happened yesterday, as the British papers played up the pope calling the sexual abuse of children an ?illness? as opposed to a disorder, and it was on the brink of happening again today. A few journalists noted the pope?s call for ?concern for victims and solidarity with priests,? wondering if he meant solidarity with abusers, but that was snuffed out as it became clear he meant solidarity with the vast majority of priests who don?t abuse anybody.

If the basic media reaction is, ?We?ve heard it before,? papal critics and some papal defenders seem tired of hearing it at all.

tThe Survivors? Network of Those Abused by Priests, the main advocacy group for victims in the States, which

has also been visible during the U.K. trip this week, released a statement which bluntly said, ?Another papal apology is a no- brainer but a non-starter.?

?Why, if the pope feels so much remorse, won?t he take action?? SNAP asked. ?The Pope can apologize daily. But until he acts, he?s a big part of the problem, not the solution.?

?Each time the Pope apologizes, a tiny handful of adult victims feel a tiny bit of short term comfort,? the statement said. ?But each time, he squanders precious time that should be spent on stopping child sex crimes and cover ups now and in the future.?

On the other side of the fence, some of the staunchest defenders of the church and the pope seem growing skeptical about the value of repeatedly apologizing, wondering if that?s actually a prescription for paralysis.

?There isn?t a chance in the world of anyone else moving on if the church doesn?t move on,? said Ann Widdecombe, a conservative British politician and an Anglican convert to Catholicism. Widdecombe has been a prominent commentator on the pope?s trip on British TV this week.

?The next stage has to be to figure out how to deal with this, without forever going over the past,? she said.

tThe box Benedict is in would appear to be this: If he stops talking about the crisis, he would likely be accused of ducking the question or artificially pretending that the problem is solved. If he keeps issuing roughly the same apology, he?ll aggravate his enemies and may frustrate a growing share of his allies.

tThat would seem to leave the pope with two options. Either he must figure out something new to say, or he has to supplement his words with actions ? some new policy, some new spiritual initiative, or some new gesture of accountability, which would lend his words new significance.

tOtherwise, the risk is that something that was initially hailed as an important moment in solving the sexual abuse crisis could become, with time, another force keeping it alive.
John Allen will be filing reports throughout the Papal visit to the U.K. Sept. 16-19. Stay tuned toNCR Today[2] for updates.

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

- Hijacking or setting him free, Benedict loves Newman [3], by John L. Allen, Jr.
- Benedict finds unlikely ally in British PM [4], by John L. Allen, Jr.
- Polarized opinion on pope fills London streets [5], by John L. Allen, Jr.
- Trying to solve the church's communications problem [6], by John L. Allen, Jr.
- Pope meets with sex abuse victims [7], by John L. Allen, Jr.
- Analysis: Benedict's in a box in talking about the crisis [8], by John L. Allen, Jr.
- Pope apologizes for 'unspeakable crimes' of sex abuse [1], by John L. Allen, Jr.
- Joint statement on meeting between Pope and Archbishop of Canterbury [9]
- Benedict in Britain: We get it, we've got it, let's share it [10], by John L. Allen, Jr.
- Pope calls on religions to defend environment, human life [11], by John L. Allen, Jr.
- Full text of pope's comments on the crisis [12], by John L. Allen, Jr.
- Of all people, Cardinal Kasper? [13], by John L. Allen, Jr.
- Benedict battles the 'dictatorship of relativism' [14], by John L. Allen, Jr.
- Pope on crisis: 'We weren't fast enough' [15], by John L. Allen, Jr.
- Benedict to step into buzz saw of dissent during upcoming UK visit [16], by John L. Allen, Jr.
- Newman still commands our attention [17], an NCR editorial
- He even prayed 'with a pen in his hand' [18], a book review by Peter L?Estrange
- Hijacking Newman [19], by Dennis Coday
- Newman: the 'sense' and 'consent' of the faithful [20], a viewpoint by Robert McClory

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 [21]
- Christopher Pramuk, Assistant professor of Theology at Xavier University in Cincinnati [22]
- Ian Ker, Professor at Oxford University and author of a Newman biography [23]
- The Very Reverend Richard Duffield, the Provost of the Birmingham Oratory [24]
- Archbishop Vincent Nichols, the Archbishop of Westminster and Primate of England [25]

Related items in Distinctly Catholic:

- When Benedict Meets With Victims [26]
- Letters between Newman and the Rev. Charles Kingsley [27]
- James Roberts, assistant editor of the British Catholic weekly The Tablet [28]
- Christopher Lamb, news editor of the British Catholic weekly The Tablet [29]
- Elena Curti, the deputy editor of the British Catholic weekly The Tablet [30]
- Catherine Pepinster, editor of the British Catholic weekly The Tablet [31]

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Links:
[1] http://ncronline.org/node/20308
[2] http://ncronline.org/blogs/ncr-today
[3] http://ncronline.org/node/20317
[4] http://ncronline.org/node/20316
[5] http://ncronline.org/node/20315
[6] http://ncronline.org/node/20314
[7] http://ncronline.org/node/20313
[8] http://ncronline.org/node/20309
[9] http://ncronline.org/node/20303
[10] http://ncronline.org/node/20306
[11] http://ncronline.org/node/20293
[12] http://ncronline.org/node/20281
[13] http://ncronline.org/node/20276
[14] http://ncronline.org/node/20274
[15] http://ncronline.org/node/20268
[16] http://ncronline.org/node/20207
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