

How the church can be a humble model

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Not long ago, critics railed against a perceived Vatican "wall of silence" on the sexual abuse crisis. To his credit, Pope Benedict XVI has breached that wall, denouncing in unflinching terms the "filth" in the church.

Papal speech shapes church culture, especially at senior levels. Therefore the importance of Benedict's candor should not be underestimated. Yet familiarity also breeds contempt, and today, papal expressions of remorse tend to leave people increasingly blasé.

To give his words greater impact, Benedict needs action to match his words.

Here's an example. After meeting with victims in the U.K., Benedict also met with church professionals in the area of child protection and rightly insisted that the church deserves some credit for the new safeguards it's put in place in recent years. Benedict suggested that the church "humbly" offer itself as a model to the broader society.

Benedict could flesh out what it means to be a humble model of child protection by convening a special Synod of Bishops to elaborate best practices in the church, perhaps by inviting world leaders in education, law enforcement, social work, and related fields to a summit in Rome to discuss how to foster a global culture of "zero tolerance" on child abuse.

Benedict has already indicated, in a Wednesday general audience just ahead of his U.K. trip, that he believes the key to recovery from the crisis lies in penance and conversion rather than structural changes. That doesn't mean the pope has ruled out structural solutions, but that he doesn't see them as the heart of the matter. Others do. And their voices continue to need a place at the discussion table.

Meanwhile, Benedict needs to press beyond repeating a now-familiar set of talking points. Otherwise, his public honesty could, ironically, become another force keeping the crisis festering.

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