NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (https://www.ncronline.org)

The Pope's State of the Church Address

Michael Sean Winters | Dec. 20, 2010 Distinctly Catholic

Each year, the Holy Father gives a Christmas Address to the Curia [1]which serves as the equivalent of a President's State of the Union. Two things jump out at me from the Pope's remarks this year.

First, on the issue of sex abuse, Benedict XVI "gets it." He brings up the issue and the first thing he says is that the Church must care for the victims. He speaks about those who help the victims heal and praises their work. He asks the central question: How could this happen? There is no prevarication. There is no insistence on limiting civil statutes of limitation to avoid paying damages. There is no gay-bashing. The Pope gets it.

The second thing that jumped out were his closing comments on conscience which, as the Holy Father indicates, may be the most misunderstood concept in the world. I wish he had gone a bit further. Conscience is where the soul dialogues with truth. It is not an excuse for relativism and excessive subjectivity, as Benedict points out. It is where the subject allows himself to get hold of by the truth and bends his will to it. But, where in the Church can conscience express itself when it is not precisely in accord with officialdom? What happens when a Church leader, a bishop or a priest, deforms the truth? How are conscientious Christians to register their concerns? Dialogue is a word that conservatives like to trash, and I sympathize with their objection that some of us on the left use dialogue as a dodge. Certainly some politicians, on both sides of the aisle, do. But, dialogue is a word with a meaning; it means "through the word." Or, in the case of Christians, "through the Word." All Christians are called to conform themselves to Christ but what is the lay Christian to do when the Church's pastors do not conform themselves to the truth? I wish the Holy Father had linked this section of his talk with his prior discussion of the clergy sex abuse. Let's be clear. There were hierarchs who blamed the media, who blamed the ambient culture, who blamed everyone but themselves for the sex abuse crisis and the cover-up. What is a lay Christian to do when his or her conscience demands that they stand up to the Church's pastors?

Taken as a whole, I had the same feeling reading this Address that I did when reading the controversial interview with Peter Seewald. Our Pope is a gifted man with a grasp of the central dramas of our day. I would not have anticipated writing this six years ago because my own prejudices had blinded me to the power of Joseph Ratzinger's mind and spirituality, but we are blessed to have this man as our Pope at this time in the Church's history. Ad Multos Annos.

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