

Pontiff Begins U.S. Visit

Pope Benedict Is 'Deeply Ashamed' Of Clergy Sex-Abuse

BY SUZANNE SATALINE

Even before landing Tuesday on his first visit to the U.S., Pope Benedict XVI tried to assuage critics who say he hasn't dealt with the clergy sex-abuse scandal that roiled American Catholicism.

On his plane, the pope said he was "deeply ashamed" of the problem and promised to keep pedophiles out of the priesthood.

"I am deeply ashamed, and we will do what is possible so this cannot happen again in the future," the pope said during the flight from Rome to Washington. "We will absolutely exclude pedophiles from the sacred ministry."

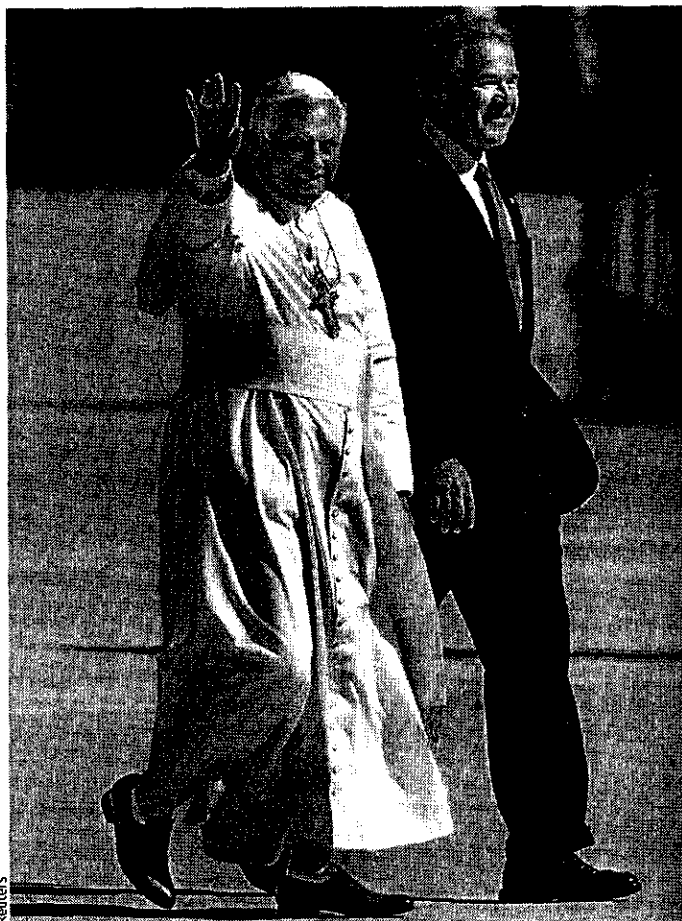
Groups that track abuse cases and advocate for victims said the comments don't do enough to address the deeper problem—that the church hierarchy, including bishops, hid or reassigned priests who had been accused of abuse.

"He could start by disciplining some of the many Catholic bishops responsible for this," said Terence McKiernan, president of BishopAccountability.org, an on-line archive that has collected information on 3,000 clergy accused of sexual abuse. One continuing issue for Catholics is that there is no way to track every clergy member who has been accused of abuse or whether they were disciplined by the Vatican. "He has names that no one else has. How many cases are there?" asked Mr. McKiernan.

Some conservative Catholics say the abuse scandal has been overblown by papal critics. Admirers of Pope Benedict laud his doctrinal vigor and say he brings high standards to the practice of the faith.

The plane carrying Pope Benedict touched down at Andrews Air Force Base in Maryland, where hundreds waited to witness his arrival for the start of a six-day visit to America. He was greeted by President Bush, who plans to meet with him at the White House. White House spokeswoman Dana Perino said the two leaders would likely discuss human rights, religious tolerance and the fight against violent extremism. They are scheduled to meet Wednesday, the pope's 81st birthday.

The pope also plans to address the United Nations, visit a synagogue and Ground Zero, and offer masses at stadiums in



Pope Benedict XVI, shown with President Bush, hopes to assuage critics who say he hasn't dealt with his church's sexual-abuse scandal in the U.S.

Washington and New York. It marks the first U.S. visit by a pontiff since the sex-abuse scandal erupted here six years ago.

The issue of abusive priests remains an open wound for many U.S. Catholics. While the pope's predecessor, the late John Paul II, was extremely popular in the U.S., his response to the priest abuse scandal is considered by many the major failing of his papacy.

Since the abuse scandal's early days, many American Catholics said the Vatican's response was tepid and secretive, that the hierarchy was more interested in protecting its own than halting abuse. One of the most bitter pills for Boston Catholics was the decision by Pope John Paul II to bring to Rome Cardinal Bernard Law, the Boston archbishop who resigned amid allegations that he had protected priests who had molested children. Court documents disclosed that Cardinal Law's administration had transferred priests who had molested children to other parishes. In Rome, he now heads one of the major basilicas.

Some critics, such as Mr. McKiernan, blame Pope Benedict per-

sonally because he served, for years, as prefect for the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, a Vatican office that safeguards church doctrine and morals. In his role, Benedict presided over complaints against priests.

One of Pope Benedict's earliest moves as pope was to censure publicly the Rev. Marcial Maciel, founder of the influential group, the Legion of Christ, which was much favored by Pope John Paul II. Some former Legion seminarians accused Father Maciel of abusing them when they were preteens and teenagers. He died in January.

Papal watchers expect that some of Pope Benedict's deepest concerns will be discussed Friday in a speech at the U.N. He is expected to discuss Iraq, and possibly Darfur and the prohibition of any kind of violence done in the name of faith.

—Gabriel Kahn

contributed to this article.

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