

**“LEARN AGAIN TO RECOGNIZE GOD AS THE
FOUNDATION OF OUR LIFE”¹**

*“IMPARARE NUOVAMENTE A RICONOSCERE DIO COME FONDAMENTO
DELLA NOSTRA VITA”*

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Introduction

On 11 April 2019, Pope emeritus Benedict XVI published his reflections surprisingly on the scandal of sexual abuse in the Church, saying it was made possible by a progressive eclipse of faith in God. Hence the solution suggested by him was: “Return to God to overcome abuse crisis”.

“The power of evil arises from our refusal to love God... Learning to love God is therefore the path of human redemption.” Pope emeritus Benedict XVI wrote those words in an article for the German periodical *Klerusblatt*, in which he reflected on the scourge of the sexual abuse of minors perpetrated by members of the clergy.

Benedict XVI took his cue from February’s meeting on the protection of minors in the Church promoted by Pope Francis to send out “a strong message” and “to make the Church again truly credible as a light among peoples and as a force in service against the powers of destruction”. He affirmed his desire to give his contribution to this mission “even though, as emeritus, I am no longer directly responsible”, and thanks Pope Francis “for everything he does to show us, again and again, the light of God, which has not disappeared, even today”.

His reflections were divided into three parts:

¹ The opening speech has been presented on 3rd September 2019 during the Meeting on protection of minors (Rome, 3-7 September 2019).

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1. Social context

In the first part, Pope Benedict explores the social context surrounding the sexual revolution that began in the 1960s. During this period, he writes, paedophilia was “diagnosed as allowed and appropriate.” He says “the extensive collapse of the next generation of priests” and “the very high number of laicizations were a consequence of all these developments.” This was accompanied by the “collapse” of Catholic moral theology, which, Benedict affirms, begins to yield to relativist temptations. According to certain theologians, he observes, “there could no longer be anything that constituted an absolute good, any more than anything fundamentally evil; [there could be] only relative value judgments. There no longer was the [absolute] good, but only the relatively better, contingent on the moment and on circumstances.”

Benedict XVI cites the 1989 Cologne Declaration, signed by 15 Catholic professors of theology, which led to “an outcry against the Magisterium of the Church” and against Pope John Paul II, who later published the Encyclical *Veritatis splendor*, in 1993, which contains “the determination that there were actions that can never become good.”

“In many circles of moral theology”, he adds, “the hypothesis was expounded that the Church does not and cannot have her own morality”. This conception, he observes, “fundamentally” calls into question the authority of the Church in matters of morality and ultimately “forces her to remain silent precisely where the boundary between truth and lies is at stake”.

2. Effects on formation of priests

In the second part of the text, the Pope emeritus explores the consequences of this process on the formation and life of priests. “In various seminaries,” he writes, “homosexual cliques were established, which acted more or less openly”. “The Holy See knew of such problems, without being informed precisely”. He writes that attitudes in line with the Second Vatican Council “were understood to mean hav-

ing a critical or negative attitude towards the hitherto existing tradition, which was now to be replaced by a new, radically open relationship with the world”, with individual bishops even seeking “to bring about a kind of new, modern ‘Catholicity’”.

Benedict XVI underlines that the question of paedophilia, as he recalls, “did not become acute until the second half of the 1980s.” He says Rome and Roman canonists at first dealt with the problem in a bland and slow manner, guaranteeing in particular the rights of the accused “to such an extent that convictions were hardly possible”. Benedict says he agreed with John Paul II that it was appropriate to assign the competence for the abuse of minors to the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, in order “to impose the maximum penalty lawfully” through a genuine criminal process”. Convictions, therefore, could lead to expulsion from the clergy. However, because delays arose, he says, “which had to be prevented owing to the nature of the matter, Pope Francis has undertaken further reforms.”

3. Perspectives on proper response

In the third part of the text, Pope emeritus Benedict XVI proposes some perspectives for a “proper response on the part of the Church.”

“The counterforce against evil, which threatens us and the whole world,” he says, “can ultimately only consist in our entering into this love.” “A world without God can only be a world without meaning”, in which the standards of good or evil no longer exist, leaving only the law of the strongest. “Power is then the only principle. Truth does not count, it actually does not exist.”

Benedict strongly accuses Western society of losing its true measure. “Western society is a society in which God is absent in the public sphere and has nothing left to offer it. And that is why it is a society in which the measure of humanity is increasingly lost. At individual points it becomes suddenly apparent that what is evil and destroys man has become a matter of course.” This is the case of paedophilia, he says. “It was theorized only a short time ago as quite legitimate, but it has spread further and further.” Benedict XVI says the an-

swer to all this is “to learn again to recognize God as the foundation of our life”.

In this perspective of returning to God, the Pope Emeritus also speaks of the need to renew faith in the Eucharist, often devalued to a “ceremonial gesture”, destroying “the greatness of the Mystery” of Christ’s death and resurrection. Instead, we need to ask the Lord for forgiveness, he says, and “ask Him to teach us all anew to understand the greatness of His suffering, His sacrifice. And we must do all we can to protect the gift of the Holy Eucharist from abuse.”

“When thinking about what action is required first and foremost,” he says, “it is rather obvious that we do not need another Church of our own design.”

“The Church today is widely regarded as just some kind of political apparatus”. “The crisis, caused by the many cases of clerical abuse, urges us to regard the Church as something almost unacceptable, which we must now take into our own hands and redesign. But a self-made Church cannot constitute hope.”

Benedict XVI says the action of the devil, whom he calls “the accuser”, is aimed at proving “that there are no righteous people”. “No, even today the Church is not just made up of bad fish and weeds. The Church of God also exists today, and today it is the very instrument through which God saves us. It is very important to oppose the lies and half-truths of the devil with the whole truth: Yes, there is sin in the Church and evil. But even today there is the Holy Church, which is indestructible.”

Today’s Church, he says, “is more than ever a “Church of the Martyrs” and thus a witness to the living God.”

Pope emeritus Benedict XVI observes that “to see and find the living Church is a wonderful task which strengthens us and makes us joyful in our Faith time and again”.

He concludes by expressing his gratitude to Pope Francis. “I would like to thank Pope Francis for everything he does to show us, again and again, the light of God, which has not disappeared, even today. Thank you, Holy Father!” These are the words of a holy and wise Pope!

As we have seen, the problem of sexual abuse in the Church is a complex phenomenon. What happens in the Church is only the tip of the iceberg covering all the strata of the society. Much of it is happening sadly in the families. While not denying the presence of this evil in the Church, all attempts to frame all priests as paedophiles and perverts must be seen as a very hypocritical attitude from the part of the society. Pope Benedict himself was criticised severely for presenting the reflections on the various dimensions of sexual abuse.

In a recent letter of Pope Francis of 4 August 2019, addressed to priests, he points out rightly that the problems with a few priests must not be used to discredit the many holy men and women in the Church. Otherwise we priests too can feel discouraged and lost. The Pope says, “Without denying or dismissing the harm caused by some of our brothers, it would be unfair not to express our gratitude to all those priests who faithfully and generously spend their lives in the service of others (cf. 2 Cor 12:15). They embody a spiritual fatherhood capable of weeping with those who weep. Countless priests make of their lives a work of mercy in areas or situations that are often hostile, isolated or ignored, even at the risk of their lives. I acknowledge and appreciate your courageous and steadfast example; in these times of turbulence, shame and pain, you demonstrate that you have joyfully put your lives on the line for the sake of the Gospel”.

The present meeting is convoked to understand the various aspects of this problem, and the various measures taken to prevent and deal with it. Decree number 2 of the XXI General Assembly has asked the General Council to ensure that in all the entities of our Society there are proper measures for the protection of the minors. The XII Consultative Congress of the Major Superiors held from 8-18 October 2018 dealt with this issue once again in great detail and spoke about the importance of doing everything possible to prevent and deal with this issue.

Accordingly, I had written to all the Major Superiors to inform the General Council what they have done in this regard. I have received a number of responses but not all have responded. There are still entities which have done very little in this regard.

Therefore, the first thing to be done is to hear from each participant about the situation in his country, local church and entity regarding this problem and the measures taken to deal with it. Each presentation could be for maximum 10 minutes.

We have invited some experts in this field to deal with various aspects: Fr. Denilson Geraldo- General Consultor and Canon Lawyer who has a vast experience in dealing with such cases; Fr. Robert Geisinger – Promoter of Justice of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith; Fr. Hans Zollner – Psychologist and Director of the Institute for the Protection of Minors, someone closely working with Vatican; Fr. Romuald Uzabumwana – General Consultor, Psychologist, who has recently done his Doctorate in this field; and finally, Fr. Adam Golec – Procurator General of our Society who is directly dealing with abuse cases and all juridical matters that come to the attention of the General Council.

Among you participants too, there are confreres who are well qualified and with a lot of practical experience in dealing with abuse cases. Your contributions and feedbacks will enrich this meeting of evaluation, formation and planning.

The whole question of sexual abuse has provoked many critical questions in my mind in all these years. I wish to share some of them.

1. The problem exists in all countries and cultures. It is not only a Western problem. There were, there are and there will be some members of the clergy who have done tremendous harm to innocent children. As moral and spiritual guardians, we have even a greater responsibility before God and people.

2. However, there is a calculated attempt to show that the Church and the entire family of priests are all sexual abusers and paedophiles by certain groups of people and media. Has the Catholic Church fallen into a trap by becoming too much apologetic? Is the civil society trying to hide behind this failure in the Church? Who cares for the systematic exploitation of children through sex tourism, child labour, child soldiers, physical and psychological abuses caused by abortion, separation of couples, single parent families and many more?

3. We see that much attention is rightly given to sexual abuse of children. Today the definition of that abuse is extended to touch, look, messages, photos and what not. It is true that nothing inappropriate can be accepted. However, is there anyone or any organisation in the world that cares for the poor and needy children as the Catholic Church and the thousands of dedicated priests, sisters and lay people working gratuitously all over the world? Are we failing to do justice to these men and women of God? For the first time, Pope Francis has changed the tone of his letter addressed to priests. Has the Church failed to protect its own priests and religious? Or are we denying the fact that we are all human beings of flesh and blood and not yet all saints? We must work hard to protect the children from all forms of abuses. May be, we need to start with the efforts to give them something to eat and provide the minimum possibility to study and experience love and protection.

4. It is also hard to understand how all psychological hurts can be removed by paying a handsome amount of money. The custom of resolving the problem with payment is prevalent more in countries like USA, Ireland and Australia. If this trend continues, we will have to sell off most of our properties. The confreres could be dead and gone 30 or 40 years ago. Anybody can accuse and it is the only one case where the persons are condemned even without a proper hearing. Even human rights are denied in some cases. Where will it all end?

5. The entire situation is having a tremendous negative impact on the life of the Church and especially on priestly vocation and mission. The damage varies from country to country. Which young man will ever think of becoming a priest? The question can be raised also on the type of formation that we are giving to our students. Certainly, much more attention must be given to spiritual and human (sexual and affective) formation. How many formators are equipped to give such a formation?

6. Having made these remarks, let me say with seriousness and clarity that all the members and entities of our Society must do everything possible to protect, defend and heal the children and vulnerable persons in our Society. Woe to us if we cause scandal to the innocent. Gone are the days when we have enjoyed uncontrolled power and

prestige. If we face this situation today, it is because we have not remained faithful to the Gospel values and our religious consecration. The ultimate solution lies in these words of Benedict XVI: “To learn again to recognize God as the foundation of our life”.

I thank each one of you for coming to participate in this important meeting. Thanks to all those who give conferences and share their experiences. In a very special way, our gratitude to Fr. Bernard Carman who, in spite of his many health concerns, has come to help us with the translation – the best translator in our Society. Thanks to all others who have extended a helping hand.

Let us make the firm decision to be rooted in God, by making the life of Jesus the fundamental rule of our life and serve the people of God as holy priests and shepherds.