

THE POPE'S WORDS - EXTRACTS FROM THE PASTORAL LETTER OF THE HOLY FATHER POPE BENEDICT XVI TO THE CATHOLICS OF IRELAND

1. DEAR BROTHERS AND SISTERS OF THE CHURCH IN IRELAND, it is with great concern that I write to you as Pastor of the universal Church. Like yourselves, I have been deeply disturbed by the information which has come to light regarding the abuse of children and vulnerable young people by members of the Church in Ireland, particularly by priests and religious. I can only share in the dismay and the sense of betrayal that so many of you have experienced on learning of these sinful and criminal acts and the way Church authorities in Ireland dealt with them.

2. The task you now face is to address the problem of abuse...with courage and determination. No one imagines that this painful situation will be resolved swiftly... Perseverance and prayer are needed, with great trust in the healing power of God's grace... the Church in Ireland must first acknowledge before the Lord and before others the serious sins committed against defenceless children...

3. Historically, the Catholics of Ireland have proved an enormous force for good at home and abroad.

4. We must try to understand the disturbing problem of child sexual abuse... among the contributing factors we can include: inadequate procedures for determining the suitability of candidates for the priesthood and the religious life; insufficient human, moral, intellectual and spiritual formation in seminaries and novitiates; a tendency in society to favour the clergy and other authority figures; and a misplaced concern for the reputation of the Church and the avoidance of scandal, resulting in failure to apply existing canonical penalties and to safeguard the dignity of every person.

5. On several occasions since my election to the See of Peter, I have met with victims of sexual abuse, as indeed I am ready to do in the future.

6. To the victims of abuse and their families

You have suffered grievously and I am truly sorry. I know that nothing can undo the wrong you have endured. Your trust has been betrayed and your dignity has been violated. ... It is understandable that you find it hard to forgive or be reconciled with the Church. In her name, I openly express the shame and remorse that we all feel... At the same time, I ask you not to lose hope. It is in the communion of the Church that we encounter the person of Jesus Christ... Like you, he still bears the wounds of his own unjust suffering. He understands the depths of your pain and its enduring effect upon your lives and your relationships, including your relationship with the Church. I know some of you find it difficult even to enter the doors of a church after all that has occurred... I believe deeply in the healing power of his (Christ's) self-sacrificing love – even in the darkest and most hopeless situations – to bring liberation and the promise of a new beginning... I pray that, by drawing nearer to Christ and by participating in the life of his Church – a Church purified by penance and renewed in pastoral charity – you will come to rediscover Christ's infinite love for each one of you. I am confident that in this way you will be able to find reconciliation, deep inner healing and peace.

7. To priests and religious who have abused children

You betrayed the trust that was placed in you by innocent young people and their parents, and you must answer for it before Almighty God and before properly constituted tribunals. You have forfeited the esteem of the people of Ireland and brought shame and dishonour upon your confreres... Together with the immense harm done to victims, great damage has been done to the Church and to the public perception of the priesthood and religious life ... God's justice summons us to give an account of our actions and to conceal nothing. Openly acknowledge your guilt, submit yourselves to the demands of justice, but do not despair of God's mercy.

8. To parents

You have been deeply shocked to learn of the terrible things that took place in what ought to be the safest and most secure environment of all. In today's world it is not easy to build a home and to bring up children. They deserve to grow up in security, loved and cherished, with a strong sense of their identity and worth. They have a right to be educated in authentic moral values rooted in the dignity of the human person, to be inspired by the truth of our Catholic faith and to learn ways of behaving and acting that lead to healthy self-esteem and lasting happiness. This noble but demanding task is entrusted in the first place to you, their parents.

9. To the children and young people of Ireland

I wish to offer you a particular word of encouragement... We are all scandalized by the sins and failures of some of the Church's members... But it is *in the Church* that you will find Jesus Christ, who is the same yesterday, today and for ever (cf. *Heb 13:8*). He loves you and he has offered himself on the cross for you. Seek a personal relationship with him within the communion of his Church, for he will never betray your trust! He alone can satisfy your deepest longings and give your lives their fullest meaning by directing them to the service of others. Keep your eyes fixed on Jesus and his goodness, and shelter the flame of faith in your heart.I look to you to be faithful disciples of our Lord and to bring your much-needed enthusiasm and idealism to the rebuilding and renewal of our beloved Church.

10. To the priests and religious of Ireland

... many of you feel personally discouraged, even abandoned. I am also aware that in some people's eyes you are tainted by association, and viewed as if you were somehow responsible for the misdeeds of others. At this painful time, I want to acknowledge the dedication of your priestly and religious lives and apostolates, and I invite you to reaffirm your faith in Christ...

11. To my brother bishops

It must be admitted that grave errors of judgement were made and failures of leadership occurred. All this has seriously undermined your credibility and effectiveness... Besides fully implementing the norms of canon law in addressing cases of child abuse, continue to cooperate with the civil authorities in their area of competence... Only decisive action carried out with complete honesty and transparency will restore the respect and good will of the Irish people towards the Church to which we have consecrated our lives.... I ask you to be attentive to the spiritual and moral lives of each one of your priests... The lay faithful, too, should be encouraged to play their proper part in the life of the Church...

12. *To all the faithful of Ireland*

In our increasingly secularized society... we need to find new ways to pass on to young people the beauty and richness of friendship with Jesus Christ in the communion of his Church... a new vision is needed, to inspire present and future generations to treasure the gift of our common faith...

13. In solidarity with all of you, I am praying earnestly that, by God's grace, the wounds afflicting so many individuals and families may be healed and that the Church in Ireland may experience a season of rebirth and spiritual renewal.

14. I now wish to propose to you some concrete initiatives to address the situation... I now invite all of you to devote your Friday penances, for a period of one year, between now and Easter 2011, to this intention... I ask you to offer up your fasting, your prayer, your reading of Scripture and your works of mercy in order to obtain the grace of healing and renewal for the Church in Ireland. I encourage you to discover anew the sacrament of Reconciliation and to avail yourselves more frequently of the transforming power of its grace.

Particular attention should also be given to Eucharistic adoration... Through intense prayer before the real presence of the Lord, you can make reparation for the sins of abuse that have done so much harm...

I intend to hold an Apostolic Visitation of certain dioceses in Ireland, as well as seminaries and religious congregations. ... I also propose that a nationwide Mission be held for all bishops, priests and religious...

I take this opportunity to thank ... the many men and women throughout Ireland already working for the safety of children in church environments. ... While no effort should be spared in improving and updating existing procedures, I am encouraged by the fact that the current safeguarding practices adopted by local Churches are being seen, in some parts of the world, as a model for other institutions to follow.

I wish to conclude this Letter with a special *Prayer for the Church in Ireland* which I send to you with the care of a father for his children and with the affection of a fellow Christian, scandalized and hurt by what has occurred in our beloved Church. ...

I cordially impart to all of you my Apostolic Blessing as a pledge of strength and peace in the Lord.