

EXTRAORDINARY MEETING BETWEEN THE CARDINALS OF THE UNITED STATES (SALA BOLOGNA DEL PALAZZO APOSTOLICO VATICANO, 23-24 APRIL 2002)

FINAL COMMUNIQUÉ

On April 23-24, 2002, an extraordinary meeting was held in the Vatican between the Cardinals of the United States and the leadership of the United States Catholic Conference of Bishops and the heads of several offices of the Holy See on the subject of the sexual abuse of minors.

The meeting was called with three goals in mind:

- on the part of the American Bishops, to inform the Holy See about the difficulties which they have faced in recent months,
- on the part of the Roman Dicasteries, to hear directly from the American Cardinals and the chief officials of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops a general evaluation of the situation,
- and together to develop ways to move forward in addressing these issues.

As is known, the Holy Father received the working group in his private library late in the morning of Tuesday, April 23, and gave a programmatic address. Today, at the end of the morning session, His Holiness invited the American Cardinals and Bishops to lunch, to continue their discussion of some of the themes raised at the meeting.

The participants first of all wish to express their unanimous gratitude to the Holy Father for his clear indications of direction and commitment for the future. In communion with the Pope they reaffirm certain basic principles:

- 1) The sexual abuse of minors is rightly considered a crime by society and is an appalling sin in the eyes of God, above all when it is perpetrated by priests and religious whose vocation is to help persons to lead holy lives before God and men.
- 2) There is a need to convey to the victims and their families a profound sense of solidarity and to provide appropriate assistance in recovering faith and receiving pastoral care.
- 3) Even if the cases of true pedophilia on the part of priests and religious are few, all the participants recognized the gravity of the problem. In the meeting, the quantitative terms of the problem were discussed, since the statistics are not very clear in this regard. Attention was drawn to the fact that almost all the cases involved adolescents and therefore were not cases of true pedophilia.
- 4) Together with the fact that a link between celibacy and pedophilia cannot be scientifically maintained, the meeting reaffirmed the value of priestly celibacy as a gift of God to the Church.
- 5) Given the doctrinal issues underlying the deplorable behavior in question, certain lines of response have been proposed:
 - a) the Pastors of the Church need clearly to promote the correct moral teaching of the Church and

publicly to reprimand individuals who spread dissent and groups which advance ambiguous approaches to pastoral care;

b) a new and serious Apostolic Visitation of seminaries and other institutes of formation must be made without delay, with particular emphasis on the need for fidelity to the Church's teaching, especially in the area of morality, and the need for a deeper study of the criteria of suitability of candidates to the priesthood.

c) it would be fitting for the Bishops of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops to ask the faithful to join them in observing a national day of prayer and penance, in reparation for the offenses perpetrated and in prayer to God for the conversion of sinners and the reconciliation of victims.

6) All the participants have seen this time as a call to a greater fidelity to the mystery of the Church. Consequently they see the present time as a moment of grace. While recognizing that practical criteria of conduct are indispensable and urgently needed, we cannot underestimate, in the words of the Holy Father, "*the power of Christian conversion, that radical decision to turn away from sin and back to God, which reaches the depths of a person's soul and can work extraordinary change*". At the same time, as His Holiness also stated, "*People need to know that there is no place in the priesthood and religious life for those who would harm the young. They must know that Bishops and priests are totally committed to the fullness of Catholic truth on matters of sexual morality, a truth as essential to the renewal of the priesthood and the episcopate as it is to the renewal of marriage and family life*".

Again in the Holy Father's words, *neither should we forget the immense spiritual, human and social good that the vast majority of priests and religious in the United States have done and are still doing. The Catholic Church in your country has always promoted human and Christian values with great vigor and generosity, in a way that has helped to consolidate all that is noble in the American people. A great work of art may be blemished, but its beauty remains; and this is a truth which any intellectually honest critic will recognize. To the Catholic communities in the United States, to their Pastors and members, to the men and women religious, to teachers in Catholic universities and schools, to American missionaries in all parts of the world, go the wholehearted thanks of the entire Catholic Church and the personal thanks of the Bishop of Rome*".

For this reason, the Cardinals and Bishops present at the meeting today sent a message to all the priests of the United States, their co-workers in the pastoral ministry.

As part of the preparation for the June meeting of the American Bishops, the United States participants in the Rome meeting presented to the Prefects of the Roman Congregations the following proposals:

1) We propose to send the respective Congregations of the Holy See a set of national standards which the Holy See will properly review (*recognitio*), in which essential elements for policies dealing with the sexual abuse of minors in Dioceses and Religious Institutes in the United States

are set forth.

2) We will propose that the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops recommend a special process for the dismissal from the clerical state of a priest who has become notorious and is guilty of the serial, predatory, sexual abuse of minors.

3) While recognizing that the Code of Canon law already contains a judicial process for the dismissal of priests guilty of sexually abusing minors, we will also propose a special process for cases which are not notorious but where the Diocesan Bishop considers the priest a threat for the protection of children and young people, in order to avoid grave scandal in the future and to safeguard the common good of the Church.

4) We will propose an Apostolic Visitation of seminaries and religious houses of formation, giving special attention to their admission requirements and the need for them to teach Catholic moral doctrine in its integrity.

5) We will propose that the Bishops of the United States make every effort to implement the challenge of the Holy Father that the present crisis "must lead to a holier priesthood, a holier episcopate, and a holier Church" by calling for deeper holiness in the Church in the United States including ourselves as Bishops, the clergy, the religious and the faithful.

6) We propose that the Bishops of the United States set aside a day for prayer and penance throughout the Church in the United States, in order to implore reconciliation and the renewal of ecclesial life.

From the Vatican, April 24, 2002