

WORLD & NATION

Pope says U.S. Catholics can survive abuse crisis

By Cindy Wooden
Catholic News Service

VATICAN CITY — Pope John Paul II has assured U.S. President George W. Bush that American Catholics have the spiritual resources to overcome the clergy sex-abuse crisis.

After Bush expressed concern about the stature of the Catholic Church in the wake of sex-abuse scandals during a May 28 meeting with the pontiff, the pope, "despite the difficulties of the moment, wanted to express his trust in the spiritual resources of American Catholics committed to giving witness to Gospel values in society," said Joaquin Navarro-Valls, papal spokesman.

White House spokesman Ari Fleischer told reporters Bush mentioned the scandal in the context of how it is damaging the influence of the Catholic Church in U.S. society.

Speaking to reporters before the meeting, Bush had said he would tell the pope: "I am concerned about the Catholic Church in America, I'm concerned about its standing. I say that because the Catholic Church is an incredibly important institution in our country."

"I'm also going to mention the fact that I appreciate the pope's leadership."

A Bush aide told reporters Bush would not raise the issue to criticize the pope, but to praise him for convoking the U.S. cardinals at the Vatican in April to discuss the crisis and ways to end it.

The president arrived at the Vatican directly from a historic summit that joined NATO and Russia as partners.

The Vatican spokesman said Bush briefed the pope on the new partnership.

The pope smiled as he greeted the president in his private library and motioned to Bush to be seated opposite him at his desk.

Bush thanked the pope for receiving him, as photographers flashed pictures. The pope, feigning annoyance with the cameras, held his hands in front of his face.

"They'll make you look good, Your Holy

Father," Bush told him.

Then a papal secretary pulled a sheaf of papers from a leather folder in front of the pope, and reporters were led out for the duration of the 20-minute meeting without translators or aides.

Since the pope and president had met less than a year ago, their agenda of common concerns had changed dramatically.

Flaring tensions in the Middle East, the U.S. war on terrorism and the new NATO partnership with Russia were discussed.

While the pope and Bush were meeting, U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell and members of his staff met with Cardinal Angelo Sodano, Vatican secretary of state, and Archbishop Jean-Louis Tauran, Vatican foreign minister.

Navarro-Valls said the discussions lingered on the tensions in the Middle East.

"In addition to the political aspects, the humanitarian dimension of the dramatic situation being lived by the Israeli and Palestinian peoples was taken into consideration," the spokesman said. "In addition, the difficult situation of Christians in the Middle East was accented."

Bush arrived at the Vatican shortly before 4 p.m., an unusual time for a papal audience with a political leader, underlining the importance both sides give to their relationship and their roles on the world stage.

Among those roles as Bush's 30-car motorcade rolled into the Vatican was Marianne Berger, 37, a Chicago Protestant who, with her husband, happened to be visiting the Vatican when they heard of Bush's visit. She said she thought it was a good idea for the president to meet with the pope.

"I think there are big issues of peace and terrorism, and it's good to unite with the pope on these issues. The pope is old, too, and the president should wish him good health," she said.

As for the sex-abuse issue, Berger said she thought the president should raise the issue because "obviously the church is in a state of crisis in the United States."

"So the pope should have an influence



Vatican/CNS

Pope John Paul II greets President George W. Bush last July 23 at the pope's summer residence in Castel Gandolfo, Italy. The two met again May 28.

on that, whether the answer is to allow priests to marry or whatever," she said.

As Palestinian suicide bombings in Israel and Israeli military action in Palestinian towns continued, efforts to bring Israel and Palestine back to the negotiating table were high on the common Vatican-U.S. agenda.

Top Vatican officials have supported a proposal that the United Nations, the United States, the European Union and Russia sponsor an international conference with Israeli and Palestinian representatives sometime this summer.

Powell has said the conference would look at security, humanitarian and economic aid, Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat's proposal to reform the Palestinian government and political solutions for the ongoing conflict.

Especially when Bethlehem's Church of the Nativity was under siege by Israeli troops with some 200 Palestinians hiding inside, Vatican officials repeatedly questioned whether the United States was doing enough to use its influence over the Israeli government to calm the situation.

The Vatican has praised U.S. efforts under Bush to promote religious freedom

around the world, especially in China.

Bush reiterated the importance of religious freedom May 26 when he visited a synagogue in St. Petersburg, Russia.

"One of the nonnegotiable demands of individual dignity is freedom of religion, and I'm impressed by what I've heard" about religious tolerance in Russia, Bush said. "It's important for this country that religious freedom flourishes and there be tolerance for all faiths."

But Bush heard another side of the story during his Russia visit from Catholic Archbishop Tadeusz Kondrusiewicz. An Italian priest and the Poland-born Bishop Jerzy Mazur of the Diocese of St. Joseph in Irkutsk have had their visas withdrawn and are unable to return to their dioceses.

The action came in the wake of new Vatican-Russian Orthodox tensions after the Vatican transformed its apostolic administrations in Russia into dioceses.

A Vatican Secretariat of State official told Catholic News Service May 28 that he expected Bush to tell the pope about his meeting with the archbishop and what he would do to follow up with Russian officials.

The official also said the Vatican was pleased with the agreement signed earlier in the day at the NATO-Russia summit.

While Russia does not become the 20th full member of NATO, it does become a partner in a new council designed to discuss NATO policy and common concerns, such as crisis management, peacekeeping, drug trafficking and joint military exercises.

Bush told the summit the "historic alliance" would promote "a Europe that is whole, free and at peace."

The Vatican official said that, while the Holy See would not prescribe any particular defense arrangement for any nation or group of nations, it believed NATO's focus on defending Europe and North America against Russia was anachronistic.

"With this agreement, Russia is inside, and we see that as positive," he said.

The president gave Pope John Paul an oval, silver medallion with a hand-painted picture of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

The pope gave Bush a 6-and-a-half-inch-high statue of Mary and the Baby Jesus carved from red coral by artisans in Torre del Greco, near Naples.

At the end of the visit, the pope told Bush, "I hope to be able to meet you again."

Contributing to this story was John Thavis at the Vatican.

USCCB president speaks out on scandal

BELLEVILLE, Ill. (CNS) — Writing in his diocesan newspaper, the president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops warned against unfair and exaggerated views of the priesthood or the Catholic Church as a result of the clergy sex-abuse crisis.

"The Catholic Church is not hopelessly corrupt — as many accounts would have you believe," Bishop Wilton D. Gregory of Belleville wrote in the May 24 issue of *The Messenger*, the Belleville diocesan paper.

"The priesthood is not filled with child molesters and perverts — in spite of the horrendous behavior of a few grotesque clerics," he added. "All bishops have not been negligent, deceitful or conniving in attempting to address this — though a number of terrible mistakes have been made by some of us."

"We have not conspired together in a clandestine plot to defraud, deceive and betray our people," Bishop Gregory wrote. "Almost every case that has come to the public's attention during these past five months represents an event that took place

in the distant past — often in the great distant past."

But, he said, "too many of us thought first of the priesthood when we ought to have placed children's safety first — always first!"

The USCCB leader said he believes "there are forces afoot in this moment that have little or no concern for the real safety of children and youth — even less concern than they claim the bishops have."

"In a great rush to join the throngs that find this moment too delicious to resist, folks from many different and sometimes opposite camps are trumpeting their agendas," he said.

"Conservatives blame a lax and immoral seminary formation program, English in the liturgy, homosexual clerics and dishonest bishops," Bishop Gregory wrote. "Liberal Catholics blame 'clericalism,' 'patriarchy,' 'hierarchical authoritarianism' and dishonest bishops. Anti-Catholics disparage 'Catholicism,' the papacy, the non-democratic hierarchical nature of the Catholic Church — and dishonest bishops."

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whether such programs are right for them. In addition to the opportunity for display advertising, this issue also will include a directory of retreat and spirituality centers in the Diocese of Rochester.