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Will the pope's pastoral letter on child sex abuse silence the critics?

Pope Benedict XVI has signed a letter to address child sex abuse in the Catholic church in Ireland. However, the document comes months after the initial cases were reported.

Pope Benedict XVI signed a pastoral letter to Irish Catholics on Friday, addressing widespread sexual abuse of children by priests over the past several decades. The letter will be read at Sunday mass at churches across Ireland, and is the first official document from the pope on the issue of child abuse.

However, this letter comes months after the Irish government's report on abuse in the church was released. It is also not expected to address more recent cases of abuse exposed in countries like the Netherlands, Austria and the pope's homeland, Germany.

"We are Church", a German Catholic reform organization, has been critical of the pope's silence on the abuse scandal in Germany. Spokesperson Christian Weisner told Deutsche Welle that, although he thinks the pope's letter to Irish Catholics is a general answer for the faithful worldwide, a more direct gesture should have been made to German victims.

"One word or one sentence of mercy and one word of empathy with the victims would have been really great," said Weisner. "But we don't expect it now, so the chance is gone."

The pope's belated response to the church in Ireland, and his recent silence on new cases of abuse, beg the question; Why is the Vatican so slow to respond publicly to such critical issues?

Decline of traditional authority

According to Bo G. Christensen, who lectures on the relationship between church and state at the Danish Institute for Study Abroad, the Roman Catholic church has lost its traditional position of authority as new believers have become increasingly individualistic in their understanding of religion.

"People who are becoming religious today are people who want to choose for themselves and express themselves," Christensen told Deutsche Welle, "Today it is the people who define what religion is about, more than the churches or institutions."

In Christensen's view, the church has reached a point where it has to devote more attention to public relations and the kind of image it is conveying - something church officials are not used to doing.

"It's a new thing for them, that they - like political parties - have to figure out what to say and what not to say, and when to say it," said Christensen. "They are in a conflict between being the institution that knows what is right and wrong, and then being flexible and open about things."

Holy communication

Another factor, according to Weisner, is that the Vatican is behind the times in this age of rapid information exchange and new media. Weisner said this was highlighted by the controversy over Bishop Richard Williamson who downplayed the Holocaust by saying Nazi gas chambers did not

exist.

In 1988 Williamson had been excommunicated for his unauthorized consecration as a bishop. In 2009 this was lifted by Pope Benedict who seemed unaware that Williamson was a 'Holocaust denier'. The Vatican later insisted that Williamson must distance himself from the views he had expressed on the Holocaust, which he failed to do.

"Even though the case went public, the Vatican was not able to realize it and stop the lifting of the excommunication," said Weisner. "Later, the pope even wrote a letter within the Vatican, saying that his own staff should make better use of the Internet for research."

Weisner believes church officials need to work not only on the speed of their communication, but also on their style.

"The Vatican has a problem with how people feel about letters from the pope and the behavior of the pope," Weisner said. "He is a religious authority, but people expect transparency and for him to take responsibility and to follow laws."

The papal letter addressing the scandal in Ireland will be published on Saturday.

The pope said he hoped it would "help in the process of repentance, healing and renewal."

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