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Sex Abuse Scandal Threatens Pope's Focus on Europe's Christian Roots

Lisa Bryant | Paris 07 April 2010

Five years after being elected pope, Benedict XVI is reeling from church sex scandals that risk undermining a central mission of his papacy: promoting Europe's Christian heritage.

On a sunny April morning five years ago, the newly elected Pope Benedict XVI explained his choice of a papal name to thousands of pilgrims massed in St. Peter's Square. He cited, among other things, one of Europe's patron saints - St. Benedict of Norcia. The pontiff called him a fundamental point of reference for Europe's unity, and a strong reminder of the region's Christian roots.

Promoting Europe's Christian heritage is a centerpiece of Benedict's papacy. But some religion analysts fear that mission is threatened by the pedophilia crisis that has battered the Roman Catholic Church, along with some media reports, strongly denied by the Vatican, that Pope Benedict may have been responsible for some of the failings of abusive priests.

Philippe Portier is director of the Group on Society, Religion and Secularity at the French National Center for Scientific Research, in Paris.

Portier says the pedophilia scandals are seriously weakening the pope's project to re-Christianize Europe. He believes the church will have great difficulty in regaining the confidence of Catholic activists who can put that goal into action.

Isabelle de Gaulmyn, head of the religion section for France's La Croix newspaper, agrees.

De Gaulmyn describes the fallout of the pedophilia reports as disastrous, and damaging to the church's efforts to have a legitimate voice in society, in the long term.

Pope Benedict inherited the project to promote Europe's Christian roots from his predecessor John-Paul II. A slew of statistics show a drift away from the church by Christians of all denominations. In France, for example, about 70 percent of the population considers itself Catholic, but only about 20 percent attend mass, even occasionally.

Earlier this decade, the Catholic church worked hard, but unsuccessfully, for a mention of Europe's Christian heritage in a draft, and ultimately discarded, European constitution. Last year, the 27-member European Union finally adopted the Lisbon Treaty to strengthen and streamline its institutions. The treaty simply refers to a dialogue with churches.

But Johanna Touzel, spokeswoman for the Brussels-based Commission of the Bishops Conferences of the European Union, says the church still has an impact on an EU-wide level.

"First thing, we are not [only"> promoting Christian roots, we are promoting human dignity and common good in all EU policies. And this is a major difference because on these two [values"> you can have non-Christians who can share them," she said.

Touzel says the pedophilia scandal has not directly affected the conference's work, but she acknowledges the church is clearly weakened because of it.

"I can only hope that this kind of earthquake in our church will lead to necessary reforms because an institution like the church [which"> is eternal, still needs to reform itself to keep pertinent in the 21st century," she added.

Some church supporters believe the scandal will help re-energize the church and that the pope's evangelizing message for Europe will not be lost. That includes Jean-Pierre Delville, a priest and theologian at the Catholic University of Leuven, in Belgium.

Father Delville says the Catholic church cannot promote Europe's Christian roots without purifying its own roots from the sin and suffering caused by abusive members. He points to Belgium as an example. A separate, high-profile 1996 court trial of a pedophile and murderer sparked wider soul searching within Belgian society, and prompted the church to crack down on sex abuses.

Church supporters can also take heart in a new poll published by France's La Croix newspaper. It indicates 61 percent of Europeans believe Christian messages and values are still meaningful, even though it says seven out of 10 believe Christians do not do a good job communicating them.

Spokesman Christian Weisner, of the international Catholic reform movement We are Church, points to the past.

"In my heart and my brain, I think there is a deep hope that the church will overcome this crisis as it overcame other crises in history," said Weisner.

In France, Monsignor Tony Anatrella, a psychoanalyst and expert on priests and pedophilia, has no doubt Pope Benedict will continue to push his message of Europe's Christian roots, regardless of his present problems.

Monsignor Anatrella says Benedict is a determined pope who will not be swayed by the events of the moment.
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