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New Pope, Same Crisis

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ALTHOUGH his papacy is not yet a week old, Benedict XVI is already assured a prominent place in the culture wars. Admirers and critics alike will pay close attention not only to his pronouncements on issues like bioethics and birth control, but also to his response to the crisis of sexually abusive priests.

Historians will debate why the politically visionary Pope John Paul II, who was well briefed by many bishops on the sex abuse scandals that erupted in 1993, stood passive, offering minimal leadership as criminal and civil actions mounted around the world. And they may yet be surprised by Pope Benedict XVI: if he stays true to his moral absolutism, the Vatican could take a stronger stance against priests who have molested children.

The notorious case of the Rev. Marcial Maciel Degollado, a powerful Mexican priest who founded his own order and lives in its seminary in Rome, suggests that the pope's approach to this issue may be evolving. While the case is yet to be decided and all legal proceedings are secret, it may offer some hope to victims of abuse looking for a change in Vatican policy under Benedict, the former Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger.

In 1998, when Cardinal Ratzinger was head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, a legal tribunal of the congregation accepted a case by nine seminarians who accused Father Maciel, founder of the Legionaries of Christ, of sexual assault. The allegations, which stretch back to the 1960's, have been presented to the Vatican on several occasions. The response has always been silence. Initially, Cardinal Ratzinger as well failed to respond; in 1999 he shelved the case, later telling a Mexican bishop that it was not "prudent" to proceed against a man who had helped the church by attracting young men to the priesthood.

Late last year, however, even as John Paul praised Father Maciel, Cardinal Ratzinger quietly reopened the case, dispatching Msgr. Charles Scicluna, a canon lawyer on his staff, to investigate the charges. Monsignor Scicluna is not allowed to speak publicly about his work. The men who charged Father Maciel, who have spoken to reporters in the past, also agreed not to speak about his investigation.

How long will the world have to wait for a verdict in the Maciel case? In the meantime, it may be useful to ask another question: why did Cardinal Ratzinger reopen the case?

Foreseeing that he might become pope, perhaps he realized that the Maciel scandal would tarnish him. Or perhaps there is a deeper reason: Cardinal Ratzinger, as head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, knew more about the crisis than anyone in the Roman Curia; all requests to defrock priests were sent to his office. As a theologian of fundamentalist convictions, he may have felt he had to confront a crisis tearing at the central nervous system of the church.

"How much filth there is in the church, and even among those who, in the priesthood, ought to belong entirely" to God, he said on Good Friday services last month in Rome. He later likened the church to "a boat about to sink, taking in water on every side."

Those are remarkable words from a theologian who considers the church as the seat of divine truth. Cardinal Ratzinger wielded a strong hand in silencing or disciplining theologians deemed errant. His comments on Good Friday suggest he has an emerging sense of how seriously this crisis threatens the church, by contradicting the mystery of faith as espoused by ecclesiastical authority. This crisis is an epic challenge to Benedict's papacy.

The lay reform group Voice of the Faithful has renewed a call it first made to John Paul, asking Benedict to meet with an international delegation of abuse survivors. That would be a great act by the pope to promote healing - and introspection at the Vatican. The pope should also make permanent the American bishops' 2002 youth protection charter, which was due to expire last month and has been only temporarily extended. He should also make it apply to all priests, not just those in the United States.

Undoubtedly Benedict does not much care how he is perceived in the culture wars, and in the past he has attributed the sexual abuse scandal to "a planned campaign" by the news media "to discredit the church." Yet he has also urged bishops not to be afraid to confront Catholics "with the authority of the truth." Benedict's first press conference, scheduled for yesterday, was an opportunity for him to clarify his position on these and other issues.

In the case of Father Maciel, and the larger crisis of which he is a symbol, Pope Benedict XVI must move forcefully in the tradition of St. Augustine: "Justice is that virtue which gives everyone his due."

Jason Berry is the co-author of "Vows of Silence: The Abuse of Power in the Papacy of John Paul II."