

The Pope and Me

In the first grade at St. Brigid's School on Long Island, Sister Mary Claudia made sixty urchins, including me, say a prayer to St. Peter because he was the "rock" upon which the Catholic Church was founded. I can't remember much more than that because I was six, but I do recall liking St. Peter which, of course, made the good Sister happy.

Now, more than 50 years after my first grade prayers, St. Peter's successor is here in America and I have mixed feelings about it.

Like millions of American Catholics, I was deeply disappointed by the Vatican's response to the priest pedophilia scandal. The fact that the late Pope John Paul II actually rewarded Bernard Cardinal Law, who covered up massive crimes by New England priests, with a cushy job in Rome was almost inexcusable.

But unlike some other Catholics, I never confuse the actual theology with the people who run the church. Jesus had nothing to do with those horrendous clerical crimes. Men committed them and other men enabled the criminals. So, despite my deep anger, my faith was not impacted by the scandal. I simply felt Pope John Paul made a huge mistake.

The current Pope, Benedict XVI, has been more condemning of the crimes but still has not explained to Americans how cover-up guys like Roger Cardinal Mahoney in Los Angeles can keep their powerful positions. I respect Pope Benedict, but that is a major unanswered question.

In our increasingly secular world, spiritual leadership is a touchy proposition. The anti-religionists will use every admission of wrongdoing as a sledgehammer. So, it is understandable that Pope Benedict must be cautious.

But there comes a time when a Pope has to demonstrate leadership no matter how difficult the circumstance. Believe me, when the pedophilia deal broke, Catholics were looking for strong public outrage from the church leadership. It never showed up.

Why? I don't know. What I do know is that every time I call on a Catholic leader to respond to a difficult moral problem, he ducks it. For whatever reason, the Church leadership in America is afraid to speak out.

Are you telling me that Jesus would not have used TV, radio and the Internet to spread his word? Come on. If Jesus were here right now, he'd definitely have a cable program or at least be doing commentary on "60 Minutes." Clerics might think about that.

So I wish Pope Benedict well in America. I sincerely hope he is able to challenge destructive secularism and reinforce Jesus' message of peace, love and compassion. But with all that has happened, Benedict has a tough task here in the USA. God help him.