

Resurrection and redemption

By Donald W. Wuerl
[*The Washington Post*](#)
Sunday, April 4, 2010

Today, Christians worldwide celebrate the resurrection of Christ. Lent is over; Good Friday has passed. To a church that has experienced the deep pain of clergy sexual abuse, these days are a reminder that from pain and sorrow eventually come hope, redemption and new life.

This new life will come only by confronting sexual abuse head-on, taking responsibility for the wrongs of the past and committing to doing all that we can never to allow the tragedy of abuse to happen again. In the United States, we bishops have put in place tough standards for reporting allegations to civil authorities because we recognize that abuse is not only a sin but also a serious crime. In the Archdiocese of Washington and in dioceses nationwide, we mandate child protection training for adults and education for children. Seminarians, clergy, volunteers and employees who work with children must undergo criminal background checks. Independent advisory boards of lay experts guide our work, and, perhaps most important, we continue to reach out to those harmed to help them heal from their pain.

In 2008-09, 6 million children in the United States received lessons on recognizing inappropriate behavior and what to do if someone tries to harm them or makes them feel uncomfortable. Two million adults underwent background checks. Here in Washington, we have had a written child protection policy for nearly 25 years.

This commitment to safety has been done with the support and leadership of Pope Benedict XVI.

Then-Cardinal Ratzinger, as the head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, and Pope John Paul II were strong voices supporting the American bishops when we asked for changes in canon law and for special norms to expedite the removal of priests involved in sexual abuse of minors in a quick and decisive manner.

Pope Benedict has made pastoral care a priority. Two years ago this month, he stood with us at Mass at Nationals Park and spoke about the sexual abuse of minors: "No words of mine could describe the pain and harm inflicted by such abuse. It is important that those who have suffered be given loving pastoral attention. Nor can I adequately describe the damage that has occurred within the community of the Church."

One of the most poignant moments of the Holy Father's visit to our city was his private visit with victims of clergy sexual abuse. He spoke with each person, he listened to them, he prayed with them and he heard how devastating the abuse was to their lives.

Clergy sexual abuse, and in fact all sexual abuse, must be addressed wherever it occurs. No child should ever be harmed. But the wrong actions of some do not justify the vilification of all. The priests who harmed children violated the heart of their ministry and have harmed not only our young people and our community of faith but also the vast majority of their brother priests who faithfully live out their promises to serve Christ and his people.

It is not easy to be a priest today. In a culture sometimes overly focused on material goods and getting ahead professionally, it may be hard to understand why someone would voluntarily choose a life of service and a job that is 24-7. Priests are there for others when they are in despair, grieving and destitute. They help people find hope in the darkness, a reason for living and the love of God.

Some of the most significant work of priests is found in what so many take for granted -- directly, quietly, caringly and effectively serving people in parishes. Priests celebrate Mass, baptize children, witness marriages, bring reconciliation through confession, serve the poor, console the sick and bury our loved ones. Their selfless ministry helps hold together the Catholic faith family and the wider community.

Priests don't expect thanks and often don't receive it. They see the priesthood as an opportunity to bring the love of Christ to others and to help them come closer to God. It is in earthen vessels that we carry a magnificent treasure.

As the Catholic Church continues to face the tragedy of clergy sexual abuse, we must pray for the victims, recommit to doing all that we can to keep children safe, and remember and pray for the priests who every day faithfully live out the deep love that Christ has for all of us.

The writer is archbishop of Washington.