

Pope encourages vocations, calls for protection of flock, children

By Sarah Delaney
Catholic News Service

VATICAN CITY (CNS) – Pope Benedict XVI called for prayer and encouragement to nourish new vocations within the church, and reminded priests that it is their job to vigorously defend their flocks from evil.

Pope Benedict marked the World Day of Prayer for Vocations by telling the faithful in St. Peter's Square April 25 that vocations are born primarily through prayer, and that they can be nourished by the prayers of parents and ordained clergy.

Before reciting the Regina Coeli, Pope Benedict said that "the most important form of witness in inspiring vocations is prayer," and he invited parents "to pray so that the hearts of your children open to listen to the Good Shepherd."

The pope emphasized the role of the priest in protecting the people they are chosen to lead and steering them to God. Quoting the Gospel of St. John, the pope said, "Only the Good Shepherd, with immense tenderness, guards his flock and defends it from evil, and only in him can the faithful put their absolute faith."

Pope Benedict reminded priests and bishops of their responsibility to "adhere totally to their vocation and mission through a severe self-discipline" of abstinence and meditation. They should be ready to listen and forgive the faithful in their care, and should also cultivate priestly fraternity, he said.

The pope reiterated the priest's role of protector by quoting St. Gregory of Nazianzus, a 4th-century doctor of the church, who wrote, "Teach us your love for the sheep ... your understanding and your watchfulness ... the battles in defense of the flock."

The pope's call to priests and bishops about their roles and duties came as the church was working to address a widening scandal regarding the abuse of minors by priests and other church personnel. Pope Benedict has pledged to do everything possible to remedy the problem.

After the prayer, the pope made a special greeting to representatives of Meter, an Italian Catholic association that promotes the protection of children from violence, exploitation and sexual abuse.

Father Fortunato Di Noto, the founder of Meter, told Vatican Radio April 25 that in Italy alone about 20,000 new cases of pedophilia are reported each year, an increase of 10.8 percent in the past five years. He said that Italians were high on the list of those involved in sexual tourism worldwide.

Meter has alerted authorities of about 200,000 pornographic Web sites featuring minors, he said.

"It's astonishing that no newspaper has reported these statistics and no one decries the scandal," he said. "The world should rise up in protest of this situation."

As Italy began a week of national recognition of child victims of violence and pedophilia, Father Di Noto said that poverty, which is an underlying factor in child abuse, must be addressed.

In the Vatican Radio interview, he underlined the connection between pedophilia and poverty, noting that with poverty there is often hunger, illiteracy, illness and an environment of general degradation where child abuse is more likely to occur. Father Di Noto called on parents, teachers, priests and all concerned members to become more aware of the problem.