



'I would tell the successor of Peter about the other Peter'

What would you say to Benedict XVI if you had the chance of a short private meeting? The writer Carla Powell would urge him to learn some techniques from New Labour in order to get his message out

I'm lucky to have already met the Pope several times for five minutes. First with Tony and Cherie Blair and then with Margaret Thatcher. I've always wanted to put my arms around him but such behaviour is not encouraged in the Apostolic Palace.

Benedict is much misunderstood. Like his predecessor, he is a man with a message. And it is a message that isn't getting through.

Where John Paul II looked east to stir the consciences of those oppressed by Communism, Benedict's gaze is on the West and what he calls "the dictatorship of relativism". By this, he means an intellectual disease which has affected the West's vitality and self-confidence and which, if left unchecked, will ultimately destroy us, because it removes the power to resist opposition to its core values.

What Benedict opposes is the absurd claim that all beliefs are of the same value. And doesn't he have a point?

Is totalitarianism of the same value as

democracy? If it is, then what do we say to the millions of free citizens once trapped behind the Iron Curtain? Or the Afghan girls formerly denied education now in school? Or gay Iranian men hanged for what would not merit a second glance in Rome, London or Paris?

Commentators often interpret Pope Benedict's use of the term moral relativism to mean intolerance. But isn't it just common sense? He is challenging us to define the roots of our own cherished values, so that we can stand up for them when they are attacked.

But the message is not getting through. Catholicism has become a byword for abuse and incompetence. That is unfair – but it nevertheless means that something radical needs to be done about communication.

So I would spend my five minutes with the Pope telling him that bad communication is nothing less than a barrier to the Gospel. Then I would tell the successor of Peter about the other Peter – Lord Mandelson – and what he did for the

Labour Party. He would make a wonderful Catholic: the best ones have always had pasts littered with rises, falls and struggles with darkness. Look at St Augustine. His line, "Lord make me good, but not yet", is a superb piece of theological spin worthy of Peter Mandelson at his best.

Of course, the Church is not a political party. Unlike Labour, it can't ditch core doctrines; and this is where parallels with what Peter did so brilliantly would be limited. But Peter Mandelson has the knack of going straight to the heart of the matter. He would show the Pope, and his advisers, how to shed the language of the university seminar and make the Church's vital message understood by the man in the Clapham omnibus, the woman in the New York cab or the family in the Beijing high-speed train. Isn't that what Jesus told us to do when he said: "Go out to the whole world and teach the Good News?"

■ Lady (Carla) Powell is a writer based in London and Rome.



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'Christ condemned those who abused children'

The chief executive of an abuse-survivors' organisation would ask Pope Benedict to put words into actions, and stand together with victims

We are both Christians and we both represent large groups of people. You represent the Catholic Church and I represent survivors of child abuse. We estimate that there are at least one billion survivors of child abuse worldwide.

Child abuse is a huge social evil that tears apart the very fabric of our society. Indeed, if you look at most of the despots of history, they almost inevitably came from a very troubled background, with many having suffered abuse. Fortunately, most of us who suffered abuse do not go on to abuse others.

I was abused by a family member and two Jesuit priests at the school I attended. Most of us internalise the shame, guilt and pain that accompanies child abuse. This is a crime like no other where the victim is left feeling they did something wrong. Such is the deception and cunning of abusers. Our Lord Jesus made it clear that he condemned those who abused children: "It would be better for you if a millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea than for you to cause one of these little ones to stumble" (Luke 17:2).

As you know, children are mostly at risk from people who are close to them. Child abusers gravitate to places where they have easy access to children. The Church that we

are a part of attracts child abusers because it has a history of protecting offenders and denigrating victims. We know that God hates his house being used as a den for robbers, so we need to stop allowing child abusers to steal the lives and innocence of our children.

Together the Catholic Church and National Association for People Abused in Childhood could really change the world by shining a light on a place which for many is murky and grim. God created a beautiful place for his children and yet for thousands of years we have stood aside, made excuses and covered up the appalling things done to our children.

Christ is returning. Let us do what we can to lead the world out of darkness. I have spoken to many people over the years who have lost their faith as a result of abuse by religious leaders. Let us, as Brothers in Christ, not merely utter words but put our words into actions. It is, after all, our love for each other that demonstrates that we are Christians. So let us help the survivors of abuse by standing together.

God bless you.

■ Peter Saunders FRSA is the chief executive of the National Association for People Abused in Childhood.