

MEETING ON THE PROTECTION OF MINORS IN THE CHURCH

Report by Bishop Gabriel Malzaire

The assembly of the 190 Presidents of Episcopal Conferences, Superiors General and the Holy Father on the issue of *The Protection of Minors in The Church* was held in the Synod Hall of Aula Paolo VI in Rome from February 21-24, 2019. The format of the four-day encounter was a combination of testimonies given by victims of abuse, presentations on the theme, group work and reports on the latter, culminating in the closing Mass held on Sunday, February 24, 2019.

The testimonies of the victims of abuse were moving and painful. They were rightfully moments of shame demanding the strongest dose of humility from the assembled prelates even just to listen. One survivor, in her testimony said to the bishops: “*Victims need to be believed, respected, cared for and healed. You need to repair what has been done to the victims, be close to them, believe them and accompany them. You are the physicians of the soul and yet, with rare exceptions, you have been transformed – in some cases – into murderers of the soul, into murderers of the faith. What a terrible contradiction*”.

On each of the first three days, the theme of the conference was ably elaborated under the three main topics, *Responsibility, Accountability and Transparency*. These were further discussed in four language groups sessions.

It was clear that any sense of *responsibility* towards the present crisis in the Church would involve knowing the pain of victims and consciously seeking to heal their wounds. This is akin to the popular saying of Pope Francis: ‘to smell like the sheep’. It necessitates keeping a balance between ‘reflection’ and ‘praxis’. engendering the desire for participants to return home after having taken full ownership, with renewed commitment, and a “new way of being,” to be better leaders and managers, teachers and administrators, and more diligent governors and caring pastors.

Despite the unique and distinct ecclesial context of each country’s culture, there was the recognition that the abuse of children and the vulnerable members of our flock is a global issue and is universally repugnant to the People of God, deserving of our best efforts for prevention and response. It was felt that those countries which have not yet experienced the scourge and damage of multiple revelation can work at prevention, education, awareness raising and at all times resolving to keep the victim at the center.

It was emphasized that one of our guiding principles must always be to look at these issues as Christ would, i.e. from the perspective of the victim, the child, the marginalized. They and their families are not to be isolated as some “outside threat”, but always to be seen as they really are – cherished members of the Body of Christ whose spirit, mind and body have been sorely damaged through our actions and inactions.

Some concrete needs were recognized in the following areas:

1. Selection and (human) formation of candidates for priesthood and consecrated life and episcopate;
2. Resource issues for small dioceses and congregations;
3. The need for clear exemplar definitions within canon law for sexual abuse and other “delicts against the sixth commandment”;
4. Prompt, timely adjudications which are open and transparent;
5. Prayer and atonement;
6. Communicating a positive theology of chastity and celibacy;
7. Presenting the call to holiness for all;
8. Disseminating what we, as Church are doing, including our “one voice” and united resolve on the matter of safeguarding;
9. A clear recognition that this was not just the fault of a few “rotten apples in the barrel”

but the outworking of something in our contemporary “ecclesial culture,” which needs to be eradicated.

Noted was the tendency of avoidance, minimizing, defensiveness, “cloaking the truth”, blaming the media, the State and others. It was recognized that bishops and superiors can be overwhelmed with the seemingly impossible task of balancing the calls to pastoral care, compassion, forgiveness and reconciliation while meeting the demands of justice, restitution, administration and effective communication. Such a situation provides a perfect avenue for the gifts, expertise, commitment, ideas and talents of lay women and men to be harnessed in addressing the management of cases, in prevention and ongoing education for family, Church and society, and in helping to heal the shared woundedness within the Body of Christ.

It was recognized that our survival and flourishing as leaders is dependent on our authenticity which can be exercised through proper *Accountability*. This was seen as most effectively exercised through support one for the other on the pastoral and administrative levels. In that regard, the Church is called to function in the collegial and synodal manner of including all in the process. In these two concepts is seen the possibilities of harvesting the benefits of the multitude of gifts and charisms bestowed on the Church to enable her sustenance and development. Again, the support of the lay faithful was seen as paramount in the safeguarding of minors within the families, the church and in the wider society. Recommendations were made for quasi-independent national offices of lay experts which would facilitate the development, dissemination and evaluation of best safeguarding practices with an audit/review function to victims and survivors. The distinctive voice of lay women and religious is seen as important and should also be welcomed.

Transparency is the other component by which the Church needs be characterized. However, it needs to be exercised in “charity;” at all times keeping victims and families in mind. The relationship and tension between transparency and pastoral approach was noted. We were struck by the statement of His Eminence, Cardinal Marx, that our Church’s systems and procedures should not be inferior in any way to those of the state. It was agreed that an essential aspect of prevention is appropriate sharing of information within the Church both nationally, regionally and internationally – from diocese to diocese, congregation to congregation, and between diocese and religious congregation. A “one-Church” approach is difficult to establish but well worth the effort.

It was emphasized that if administration is to serve the mission of the Church, then it should not be used to obstruct or to delay natural justice via e.g. dilatory approaches and finding loopholes in litigation; or, complicated structures of bureaucracy within the Holy See. Administration used well can help to prevent and protect from abuse; administration used badly can compound hurt and add to abuse.

The homily of Archbishop Mark Coleridge of Brisbane and the Holy Father’s address at the closing liturgy on Sunday, March 24, 2019 brought a fitting climax to the four-day summit of the Catholic Church’s leaders. In his homily Archbishop Coleridge emphasized that victims and survivors of clerical sexual abuse who have challenged the Church to see abuse and its concealment, are not the enemy, even when treated as if they are”. He said: “We have not loved them, we have not blessed them. In that sense, we have been our own worst enemy”. He also called for a “Copernican revolution,” leading to the discovery that those who have been abused don’t “revolve around the Church, but the Church around them”. The Church needs to understand that “the wounds of those who have been abused are our wounds, that their fate is ours, that they are not our enemies but bone of our bones, flesh of our flesh.”

In his closing address, while Pope Francis referenced the fact that sexual abuse of children is a problem for society as a whole, and that the majority of cases take place within

the family, and to a significant extent, in neighbourhoods, schools and athletic facilities, he did not spare the culpability of the church in the scheme. The following are some salient quotes from his address in which he communicates the sentiments which he presents as the parting disposition of the conference:

- *Clerical sexual abuse is the work of the devil and Church personnel complicit in abuse become tools of Satan.*
- *If in the Church there should emerge even a single case of abuse - which already in itself represents an atrocity - that case will be faced with the utmost seriousness.*
- *Indeed, in people's justified anger, the Church sees the reflection of the wrath of God, betrayed and insulted by these deceitful consecrated persons. It is our duty to pay close heed to this silent, choked cry.*
- *There's no explanation for abuses involving children, and hence it is important to "recognize with humility" that the Church stands "face to face with the mystery of evil."*
- *This is a "universal problem," and the evil is no "less monstrous when it takes place within the Church." It's actually more scandalous, because it's incompatible with the Church's moral and ethical credibility.*
- *To clean up the Catholic Church is not enough to protect children: "The Church's aim will thus be to hear, watch over, protect and care for abused, exploited and forgotten children, wherever they are.*
- *To accomplish this, the Church will have to rise above "ideological disputes and journalistic practices" that exploit tragedy and work together with the whole of society to eradicate this "evil from the body of our humanity".*
- *The time has come to find an equilibrium to address this evil, avoiding the extremes of a hasty concept of justice provoked by guilt of past errors and pressure from the media, as well as "defensiveness that fails to confront the causes and effects of these grave crimes."*

The Holy Father listed eight "best practices" formulated under the guidelines of the World Health Organization that he complemented with the work carried out by the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors and reflections by the 190 participants of the summit. These best practices are:

1. Protection of children;
2. Impeccable seriousness;
3. Genuine purification;
4. Formation;
5. Strengthening and reviewing guidelines by episcopal conferences;
6. Accompaniment of those who have been abused;
7. The digital world, and
8. Sexual tourism.

He continued by saying:

- *The primary goal of every measure has to be the protection of minors from any form of psychological and physical abuse. To achieve this, "a change of mentality is needed to combat a defensive and reactive approach to protecting the institution and to pursue, wholeheartedly and decisively, the good of the community by giving priority to the victims of abuse in every sense."*
- *The Catholic Church will "spare no effort" to do what's necessary to bring justice to those who've been hurt, never staying silent or failing to treat each case with the seriousness it deserves. In addition, beyond preventing abuse, the Church needs a "constantly renewed commitment to the holiness of pastors," constantly questioning how best to protect children, avoid these crimes and bring healing to survivors and*

victims. *“The holy fear of God leads us to accuse ourselves - as individuals and as an institution - and to make up for our failures, fall into the trap of blaming others, which is a step towards the ‘alibi’ that separates us from reality”.*

The Holy Father also called for constant formation, and seminaries screening not only to keep unsuitable candidates out, but also to focus on fostering holiness and chastity. He stressed that the guidelines from bishops’ conferences must be strengthened and reviewed, reaffirming the need for bishops to be united in the application of parameters that “serve as rules and not simply indications.” “No abuse should ever be covered up (as was often the case in the past) or not taken sufficiently seriously, since covering up abuse favours the spread of evil and adds a further level of scandal.” He recognized that the protection of children must take into account new forms of abuse, many of which come from the digital world, such as child pornography.

During the midday Angelus, the Holy Fathers most adequately summarized the message he wants communicated to the entire world. He said to the overflowing piazza of people: *“We want every activity and place of the Church always to be fully safe for minors. We want all possible measures to be taken so that similar crimes aren’t repeated, and that the Church returns to being absolutely credible and trustworthy in its mission of service and education for the little ones, according to the teaching of Jesus.”*