

In Baltimore kickoff to speaking tour, Irish abuse survivor says she is disappointed with global reforms

Clergy sexual abuse survivor Marie Collins kicked off a five-city U.S. speaking tour on “The Catholic Tipping Point” in Baltimore Sept. 10, noting that she is disappointed with the results of the Vatican summit on child protection and efforts toward accountability and transparency.

Collins, who was one of the original members of the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors, resigned from that group in 2017 because she was concerned that promised reforms were not being implemented and Vatican leaders were impeding the commission’s work.

Collins also met before her talk with Archbishop William E. Lori and members of the child and youth protection staff of the archdiocese and a few key members of the Independent Review Board that advises about child protection policies and procedures.

Speaking to a crowd of about 100 people at the First Unitarian Church of Baltimore, Collins said the abuse crisis has brought the church to a tipping point.

“The church has come to a crossroads,” she said. “It’s got to decide where it’s going to go next because if it doesn’t change, it’s going to lose everything.”

That would be a shame, she said, because the church does a great deal and there are many good people in the church. She said she no longer depends on whether the leadership of the church can effect change and that it is time for the laity to act.

Before the talk, Collins told the Catholic Review she was disappointed in the outcomes of a Vatican summit on child protection in February. “We had been told it would be about responsibility, accountability and transparency,” she said.

“What we saw come out of it was a (promise of) handbook for bishops — that has not

come out yet — and a safeguarding policy for Vatican City, which if you look at it is nothing to boast about, because this is 2019. They should have had a safeguarding policy in position decades ago.”

She said Pope Francis’ *motu proprio* document, “*Vos Estis Lux Mundi*” (“You Are the Light of the World”), includes a number of protocols for addressing abuse claims, with the intent of holding church leaders accountable for actions or omissions related to the handling of such reports. “It’s still bishops investigating bishops,” she said of the new norms. “Many would see that as just inappropriate and not the answer.”

She said a policy is “not worth the paper is printed on unless there’s some sort of consequence” for bishops who ignore the policy or are negligent in handling allegations of abuse.

“We’ve seen too much in the church now — far too many revelations of corruption on this level. The power is corrupted. We have moral corruption, financial corruption.”

Collins blamed clericalism — “some men feeling that because they’re a prince of the church, they can basically do anything and their colleagues will protect them. And that day is coming to an end. But those sort of men, really they need to be cleared out of the church.”

In her talk at the Unitarian church, Collins said she was molested by a hospital chaplain in Ireland when she was 12 years old. She related how, when she finally reported the abuse to a local priest many years later, she was told that she must have tempted the priest who abused her. The priest later lied about that meeting.

Ten years later, she reported it to the diocese and the hospital where the abuse occurred. The hospital offered counseling and reported the allegation to the police; the diocese said at the time that the priest had never had any such allegations against him, which was later found to be false.

“I was lied to in the worst way,” she said. When the archdiocese made a statement that it had followed church guidelines in reporting and dealing with the abuse, Collins said she later met with the archbishop, who told her that the archdiocese

was allowed to ignore the guidelines because they had no bearing in canon or civil law.

She said that Archbishop Diarmuid Martin, the next Archbishop of Dublin, set up a strong child protection office — a “gold standard” that other bishops should follow. At the archdiocese’s invitation, she joined a committee drafting child protection guidelines. “You can’t criticize if you’re not willing to help if asked,” she said. The committee later voted to disband when the committee was encouraged to weaken the document.

“The document released was very weak,” Collins said, and it noted that a complaint against a lay person would be reported to civil authorities, but a complaint against a priest would be handled internally.

In 2014, she was invited to be part of a new Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors, and she agreed to participate in the group, which was half lay people and half clergy. Collins was the only member who was a survivor of clergy sexual abuse.

“Sadly, the promises were not kept,” she said. The commission could not get adequate staffing and resources or access to other Vatican departments.

She resigned in 2017 when she said it was clear the commission wouldn’t be able to do what it had intended.

“We put forward a lot of good recommendations to the pope,” she said. “They were sent to the curia. None of the recommendations from 2014 to 2018 were implemented.”

She praised Cardinal Seán O’Malley of Boston, who chaired the commission, for doing what he could. “I don’t believe he’s a liar,” but she thinks Pope Francis has people “whispering in his ear” who don’t have the best interests of children as a priority.

“I believe the pope is doing his best,” she added, “but I believe he’s not being told the truth.”

She said she met with Pope Francis when he visited Dublin in August 2018 for the

World Meeting of Families. In her Baltimore talk, she said that on the flight back to Rome, the pope said “Marie Collins is fixated about accountability.”

“I am,” she said, to applause. “I take pride in that.”

On that flight, the pope was asked about Collins and the idea of a tribunal to investigate bishops rather than having bishops investigate other bishops.

“Marie Collins puts much emphasis on the idea (of having a tribunal),” a Vatican translation of the press conference said. “I have great respect for Marie Collins; sometimes in the Vatican we call her to give a presentation – she emphasizes the idea of the [2016 *motu proprio*] ‘As a Loving Mother,’ in which it was said that to judge bishops, it would be good to set up a special tribunal.”

The pope added that bishops are judged by “a jury for each bishop,” though he acknowledged that is not the same thing as setting up a standing tribunal.

“But it’s clear, and I said this to Marie: the spirit and the recommendation of ‘As a Loving Mother’ are being put into effect: a bishop must be judged by a tribunal, but not always the same tribunal, because that is not possible,” the pope said on the flight.

“She [Marie Collins] didn’t understand this entirely, but when I see her – because she comes to the Vatican sometimes, we call her – I will explain it to her more clearly. I like her,” Pope Francis said.

In her talk at the Unitarian Church, Collins emphasized, “The church cannot continue to be an institution where clerical secrecy and total dysfunction can continue.” The church needs to remove anyone who would abuse children. “They should all be cleaned out and any colleagues who protected them.”

The laity have power in the church, she said. “It’s our church. It’s our children. We must act.”

Archbishop Lori invited Collins to meet prior to the public event with him, members of the archdiocese’s child protection staff and members of the Independent Review Board. The 90-minute meeting allowed them to hear her perspective as a victim-

survivor and to share with her information about the archdiocese's child protection efforts.

"I was most grateful to Ms. Collins for agreeing to meet with us and for sharing her very personal and painful experience with abuse by a Catholic priest in Ireland, as well as her insights into how the Church can better communicate with and contribute to the healing of victims of abuse," Archbishop Lori said. "Ms. Collins underscored the importance of listening to victim-survivors and of meeting each of them where they are in their individual journeys of healing and of faith. I am most grateful to her for her counsel and pray she will continue to be a courageous witness as together we seek to heal the wounds of abuse."

Asked about the meeting, Collins told the Catholic Review, "The review board and the people who are actually working on protecting children here, from what I heard, it sounds as though they're very conscientious about the work they're doing.

"It was encouraging to hear how much effort was being put into the work to keep children safe and I wish it the same would be in every diocese, not only in America but everywhere there's a Catholic Church," she said.

Iona R. Rudisill, Anti-Trafficking and Exploitation Program Manager for the Baltimore Child Abuse Center and a member of the archdiocese's Independent Review Board, said it was "humbling" to hear Collins' perspective.

"Her transparency helps to build bridges between clergy and laity, clergy and survivors of child sexual abuse as well as survivors and the community," she said.

Rudisill noted that the concerns Collins addressed apply not just to the church, but the whole world.

"I am thankful to have had the opportunity to hear the unadulterated truth from Marie because it helps us to collectively do better as a team," she said.

She believes it was productive for Collins to hear what the archdiocese is doing to address and prevent child abuse.

"It helps to validate her work and see that although we are not where we want to be,

we are further than we were and actively pursuing to be better,” she said.

The archdiocese strives to have partnerships with survivors in the work that the office and review board do. “When she stated that she was critical of the church’s response to child sexual exploitation yet still unwavering in her faith, it demonstrated that it’s OK to be critical of something that you love and (at the same time) still be supportive” in order for change to come about.

Monsignor Robert Jaskot, pastor of Holy Family in Middletown and St. Francis-St. Mary and the only clergy member of the review board, said it’s always tragic to hear the story of abuse and the lifetime impact on the victim-survivor and his or her family.

“Marie spoke beautifully and eloquently about the devastation in her life and her worth as a human being, and to begin healing – a process which will never be truly complete,” he said.

He said he was very grateful to Collins for sharing her story. “There’s a healing in telling it and a healing in being able to share it.”

He said he asked her as a pastor about ways to help victim-survivors. “It was helpful to have someone who’s open provide that sounding board,” Monsignor Jaskot said.

After Baltimore, Collins’ “Catholic Tipping Point” tour was to visit Philadelphia (Sept. 12), Chicago (Sept. 14), New Orleans (Sept. 17) and Los Angeles (Sept. 20).

Email Christopher Guntz at editor@CatholicReview.org