

Pope: Abuse victims' outcry more powerful than efforts to silence them

VATICAN CITY — “No effort must be spared” to prevent future cases of clerical sexual abuse and “to prevent the possibility of their being covered up,” Pope Francis said in a letter addressed “to the people of God.”

“I acknowledge once more the suffering endured by many minors due to sexual abuse, the abuse of power and the abuse of conscience perpetrated by a significant number of clerics and consecrated persons,” the pope wrote in the letter dated and released Aug. 20.

The letter was published less than a week after the release of a Pennsylvania grand jury report on decades of clerical sexual abuse and coverups in six dioceses. The report spoke of credible allegations against 301 priests in cases involving more than 1,000 children.

“The heart-wrenching pain of these victims, which cries out to heaven, was long ignored, kept quiet or silenced,” Pope Francis said. “But their outcry was more powerful than all the measures meant to silence them.”

“The pain of the victims and their families is also our pain,” he said, “and so it is urgent that we once more reaffirm our commitment to ensure the protection of minors and of vulnerable adults.”

In his letter, Pope Francis insisted all Catholics must be involved in the effort to accompany victims, to strengthen safeguarding measures and to end a culture

where abuse is covered up.

While the letter called all Catholics to prayer and fasting, it does not change any current policies or offer specific new norms.

It did, however, insist that “clericalism” has been a key part of the problem and said the involvement of the laity will be crucial to addressing the crime and scandal.

Change, he said, will require “the active participation of all the members of God’s people.”

“Many communities where sexual abuse and the abuse of power and conscience have occurred,” he said, are groups where there has been an effort to “reduce the people of God to small elites.”

“Clericalism, whether fostered by priests themselves or by lay persons, leads to a split in the ecclesial body that supports and helps to perpetuate many of the evils that we are condemning today,” Pope Francis said. “To say ‘no’ to abuse is to say an emphatic ‘no’ to all forms of clericalism.”

In his letter, Pope Francis acknowledged the church’s failure.

“With shame and repentance, we acknowledge as an ecclesial community that we were not where we should have been, that we did not act in a timely manner, realizing the magnitude and the gravity of the damage done to so many lives,” he wrote.

“We showed no care for the little ones,” Pope Francis said. “We abandoned them.”

“Looking back to the past, no effort to beg pardon and to seek to repair the harm done will ever be sufficient,” he said. “Looking ahead to the future, no effort must be spared to create a culture able to prevent such situations from happening, but also

to prevent the possibility of their being covered up and perpetuated.”

Recognizing the safeguarding policies that have been adopted in various parts of the world as well as pledges of “zero tolerance” for abusive clerics, Pope Francis also acknowledged that “we have delayed in applying these actions and sanctions that are so necessary, yet I am confident that they will help to guarantee a greater culture of care in the present and future.”

As members of the church, he said, all Catholics should “beg forgiveness for our own sins and the sins of others.”

Pope Francis also asked Catholics to pray and to fast so that they would be able to hear “the hushed pain” of abuse survivors.

He called for “a fasting that can make us hunger and thirst for justice and impel us to walk in the truth, supporting all the judicial measures that may be necessary. A fasting that shakes us up and leads us to be committed in truth and charity with all men and women of good will, and with society in general, to combating all forms of the abuse of power, sexual abuse and the abuse of conscience.”

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