

Pope meets abuse victims, expresses shame, sorrow for their suffering

VALLETTA, Malta - Pope Benedict XVI met with eight victims of priestly sex abuse in Malta and promised them the church would do "all in its power" to bring offenders to justice and protect children.

The pope was "deeply moved by their stories and expressed his shame and sorrow over what victims and their families have suffered," a Vatican statement said after the private encounter April 18.

"He prayed with them and assured them that the church is doing, and will continue to do, all in its power to investigate allegations, to bring to justice those responsible for abuse and to implement effective measures designed to safeguard young people in the future," the statement said.

"In the spirit of his recent letter to the Catholics of Ireland, he prayed that all the victims of abuse would experience healing and reconciliation, enabling them to move forward with renewed hope," it said.

The meeting at the apostolic nunciature in Rabat came after a group of victims had asked to meet with the pope to tell him of their ordeal and ask for an apology. The encounter was not part of the pope's official itinerary and was only announced publicly by the Vatican after it had happened.

Participants said the victims cried as they told their stories, and that the pope had tears in his eyes as he listened.

"We now have peace in our hearts, even because the pope found time to meet us. We now look forward to the end of the court case, and closure of this chapter," one unidentified victims told the Times of Malta.

The Vatican spokesman, Jesuit Father Federico Lombardi, told journalists that the

private meeting in the chapel of the nunciature lasted about 20 minutes. He said the pope, Archbishop Paul Cremona of Malta, Bishop Mario Grech of Gozo and eight male victims of abuse began the encounter kneeling in silent prayer.

The pope then stood by the altar and met with each victim one by one to hear his story and to speak with each privately, Father Lombardi said. The victims were in their 30s and 40s, Father Lombardi said.

At the end of the meeting, participants said a prayer together in Maltese and the pope blessed the victims. One victim said the pope gave each of them a rosary and promised them they would be in his prayers.

One of the victims, Lawrence Grech, told the Maltese paper that the two bishops with them shed tears during their meeting. Another said the pope had tears in his eyes.

"I admire the pope for his courage in meeting us. He was embarrassed by the failings of others," said Grech.

Grech, one of the victims who had asked for the papal meeting, has said he and others were abused as boys by four priests at the St. Joseph Orphanage in Santa Venera.

The meeting came after the pope returned from a public Mass to the nunciature, where he has been staying during his April 17-18 pilgrimage to Malta. Father Lombardi had told journalists before the trip that any eventual meeting with abuse victims would not be announced in advance and would take place out of the media spotlight to guarantee "the real chance of listening and private conversation."

During his public events in Malta, the pope did not refer explicitly to the problem of the sexual abuse of minors by priests. He did make two subtle references to the problem when he spoke to journalists aboard the papal flight from Rome to Malta.

Speaking about the vitality of the Catholic faith in Malta, he said even when the body of the church "is wounded by our sins, God loves this church, and its Gospel is the true force that purifies and heals."

He then spoke of how St. Paul turned the tragedy of being shipwrecked on Malta into a positive opportunity when he decided to heal the sick and preach the power of Christ. Out of tragedy can come a new beginning and “life’s shipwrecks can be part of God’s plan for us and they may also be useful for new beginnings in our lives,” the pope said.

Father Lombardi told journalists aboard the plane that the pope’s comments were in reference to the sex abuse crisis facing the church.

Archbishop Cremona had met April 13 with a group of victims, including Grech, at their request. That meeting, which lasted two and a half hours, was “a great help” to the victims, Grech told reporters. Grech said Archbishop Cremona listened carefully to each victim.

Grech said his only wish was that the meeting with Archbishop Cremona had happened earlier. Grech has been critical of the length of time it has taken his case and others to be handled by the Response Team established by the church in Malta to look into sex abuse.

“We have been waiting for seven years for our case to end but justice has not yet been done,” he told reporters April 16.

Welcoming the pope at Malta’s international airport April 17, President George Abela said “the Catholic church remains committed to safeguarding children and all vulnerable people, and to seeing that there is no hiding place for those who seek to do harm.”

“It is therefore the church and even the state’s duty to work hand in hand to issue directives and enact legislation so that effective, transparent mechanisms are set up, together with harmonized and expeditious procedures in order to curb cases of abuse so that justice will not only be done but seen to be done,” he said.

A group of 10 victims announced April 16 that they had been granted a meeting with the promoter of justice in the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Monsignor Charles Scicluna. The meeting with the monsignor, who handles the cases local dioceses have brought against allegedly abusive priests, was to take place sometime

in June at the Vatican.

Grech said of the planned meeting at the Vatican: “This is very good news for us. It shows that the Maltese church and now the Vatican are now taking our case and our pain seriously.”

In an extensive interview with the Times of Malta April 11, Monsignor Scicluna, who is from Malta, said the church is still “on a learning curve” concerning the handling of sex abuse allegations and that they “should learn to do things more expeditiously.”

“I think that efforts to render the process more transparent will only help the church,” he said.

He said the doctrinal congregation has had to deal with “the frustration some of them (cases of abuse) made us feel because justice was not meted out as it should be.”

Justice has not always been served, he said, “because of a misplaced sense of protection of the institution; the mentality that you don’t criticize the clergy because otherwise you’re going to betray the institution,” he said.

The fear of criticizing exists on all levels within the church and includes “even the inability of certain people to denounce abuse against minors,” he said.

While he has said there is “a culture of silence” in Italy, he added that that same culture of not speaking out about abuse exists in all parts of the world.

The Archdiocese of Malta has said that since it was set up in 1999, the Response Team has received accusations against 45 priests in connection with more than 80 allegations of sexual abuse against minors.

Since 1999, three priests have faced criminal trials in civil courts after the victims decided to go to the police because they were unhappy with how the Response Team was handling the case.

The Archdiocese of Malta said that of the 45 cases investigated by the church’s

Response Team, 19 were found to be baseless, 13 were still ongoing and cases against 13 members of the clergy have been forwarded to the Vatican.