

Pope Francis Ends Landmark Sex Abuse Meeting With Strong Words, but Few Actions



In a speech after a Mass at the Vatican on Sunday, Pope Francis said that “even a single case of abuse” must be met “with the utmost seriousness.” CreditCreditGiuseppe Lami/ANSA, via Associated Press

VATICAN CITY — Pope Francis ended a landmark Vatican meeting on clerical sexual abuse by calling “for an all-out battle against the abuse of minors” and insisting that the church needed to protect children “from ravenous wolves.”

But for all the vivid language and the vow “to combat this evil that strikes at the very heart of our mission,” the pope’s speech was short on the sort of detailed battle plan demanded by many Catholics around the world.

Francis had barely finished speaking before some abuse victims and other frustrated faithful began expressing outrage and disappointment at his failure to outline immediate and concrete steps to address the problem.

“Pope Francis’ talk today was a stunning letdown, a catastrophic misreading of the grief and outrage of the faithful,” said Anne Barrett Doyle, a leader of BishopAccountability.org, which tracks incidents of abuse in the church. “As the world’s Catholics cry out for concrete change, the pope instead provides tepid promises, all of which we’ve heard before.”

Pope Francis had raised expectations for a policy breakthrough in September when he summoned the presidents of the world’s local bishops conferences to participate in the meeting.

Abuse victims and their advocates held high hopes that Francis, who seemed in the last year to overcome his own blind spots on an issue on which he had repeatedly stumbled, would use his absolute authority to institute a churchwide law dismissing abusive priests and the bishops who cover up for them.

He did not.

Instead, with the abuse scandals threatening the credibility of his papacy, the pope decided that the best way for the church to address the problem lay not in issuing an edict from Rome but in setting out to change the hearts and minds of church leaders at the local level around the world.

The pope used the meeting to try to persuade skeptical bishops to take strong action against abusive clerics and to hold themselves accountable for protecting the faithful in their dioceses, rather than simply changing church law himself.

The prelates who organized the summit argued that any papal edicts might fall flat or fade away with Francis’ papacy. In their view, what is required is a broad cultural shift and an acknowledgment of the problem, especially in Latin American, African and Asian countries, where the future of the church lies.

“At the end of the day, it is the change of heart that is important,” Archbishop Charles Scicluna, the Vatican’s leading sex-crimes investigator, said on Sunday afternoon.

The Rev. Hans Zollner, another leader in the church’s efforts to safeguard children, said the church had made a “leap” forward by getting at the “systemic roots” of the scandal. But he acknowledged that it would take more time and energy to “turn a big ship around.”

This focus on the spiritual evolution of bishops, and on the importance of getting them to work together to tackle sexual abuse, was a letdown to those who had hoped the pope would act boldly, drawing on his own authority.

“The pope is the sole legislator, so he could make this change whenever he wants,” said Nicholas P. Cafardi, a prominent canon lawyer in the United States. “Zero tolerance should be universal law, and the Holy Father can do it himself.”

After the pope’s speech, the Vatican did announce that some specific steps that would be taken soon.

One was described by church officials as a toughening up of child-protection laws within the Vatican’s boundaries. They also spoke of a “very brief” handbook for bishops to understand their duties when it comes to abuse cases, and of new task forces of experts and canon lawyers to assist bishops in countries with less experience and resources.

But those limited measures had already been developed before the summit, and were not shaped by the meeting, Vatican officials said.

The pope’s bishop-focused approach carries real risks both for him and the church he leads. While Vatican officials believe it is the right course, it is one in which change may come more slowly than the faithful in some countries ravaged by the abuse crisis have begun to demand.

The Roman Catholic Church has been devastated, and Francis’ legacy threatened, by a cascade of investigations by civil authorities into clerical sexual abuse. There have also been accusations from within his own hierarchy that he covered up the misconduct of a top prelate, Theodore McCarrick, a former cardinal and archbishop of Washington who has been defrocked.

Francis has begun to be unsparing in the language he uses to describe the problem. On Sunday, he compared the abuse of minors to “sacrificing human beings, frequently children, in pagan rites.”

“Consecrated persons, chosen by God to guide souls to salvation, let themselves be dominated by their human frailty or sickness and thus become tools of Satan,” he said. “In abuse, we see the hand of the evil that does not spare even the innocence of children. No explanations suffice for these abuses involving

children.”

But high-profile cases involving the negligence by bishops, the abuse of nuns and other misconduct added to the pressure on Francis to do more than just talk.

Francis had sought to tamp down expectations about the Vatican meeting, fostered by some of his own bishops, that the conference would deliver instant remedies to end the scourge. He said the meeting was intended to educate all the bishops on the gravity of the problem of sexual abuse.

Still, at times, the four-day summit did seem like a significant turning point for the church.

Outside the Vatican walls, abuse survivors marched and held rolling news conferences.

Inside, at sessions presided over by Pope Francis himself, the world’s top bishops, clad in their black cassocks and purple sashes, listened every day to the brutal testimony of abuse survivors — many of whom spoke about the indifference and complicity of church leaders like them. A Nigerian nun excoriated them for their hypocritical silence and lack of transparency.

In a bid to improve relations with the news media, the organizers invited a veteran Vatican reporter from Mexico to address the gathering.

“If you do not decide in a radical way to be on the side of the children, mothers, families, civil society, you are right to be afraid of us,” said the reporter, Valentina Alazraki. And if they remain in denial, she said, honest reporters “will be your worst enemies.”

However frustrated many of the faithful were by the meeting, high-ranking church officials said it had achieved a positive outcome.

Cardinal Daniel N. DiNardo, the president of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, said on Saturday that he was “very pleased,” even if specific action still needed to be determined.

At first, Cardinal DiNardo said, some countries did not want to admit that they had the same problems as the United States, Cardinal DiNardo said. But in the end, he said, he was impressed with the consensus that developed.

"This went far better than I think some of us had hoped," he said. "Now you have the bishops all saying it's ubiquitous."

Cardinal DiNardo said he expected the American church would be asked for resources to assist other dioceses in rolling out reforms. "That's what I think people want," he said. "They want us to take action."

Archbishop Eamon Martin, president of the Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference, said that the obligation to protect children in the church rightfully fell on the world's bishops.

"I am always frightened about the thought that somehow safeguarding can be commanded from Rome," he said on Saturday.

Archbishop Martin argued that the meeting itself had sent a strong message of what was expected of bishops, even those skeptical of how widespread the crisis is.

As a result, he said, the world's bishops have moved "much closer" to having universal zero-tolerance rules for removing abusers from ministry.

"Every one of us must return home committed to some actions," he said.

He added, "If somebody is in such a grave breach of trust as to have failed to protect children and young people from abuse, I simply can't imagine how they can continue to either minister as a priest or, indeed, to be the chief shepherd."

Archbishop Mark Benedict Coleridge, the president of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, said in his homily during the meeting's closing Mass on Sunday that the church needed to believe survivors and work to bring them justice, ensure that abusers never have the opportunity "to offend" again, call to account bishops who have covered up abuse and make the church a safe place again.

"We have been our own worst enemy," he said.

Archbishop Mark Benedict Coleridge compared the wakening of the bishops to the reality of sexual abuse to "a Copernican revolution," and said the church needed to put the victims, like the sun, at the center of their solar system.

He acknowledged that reforms would take time, but warned: “We do not have forever. And we dare not fail.”

Some of the faithful who came to hear Pope Francis in St. Peter’s Square on Sunday were watching for what came next.

“Everything depends on whether or not they follow through,” said Andrew Bradfield, who is from Cork, Ireland. “If those are just more empty words, the church will continue to become more isolated.”

Elisabetta Povoledo contributed reporting.

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