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Audience with members of the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors

At 11.40 this morning, in the Vatican Apostolic Palace, the Holy Father Francis received in audience the members of the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors, for the opening of the Plenary Assembly.

After the welcome address from His Eminence Cardinal Sean Patrick O'Malley, O.F.M. Cap., president of the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors, the Pope handed the following discourse to those present:

Address of the Holy Father

I warmly welcome you at the beginning of this Plenary Assembly. In particular, I would like to thank Cardinal O'Malley for his kind greeting and at the same time express my sincere appreciation for the reflections you have made on behalf of Mr. Hermenegild Makoro and Mr. Bill Kilgallon. They have expressed very well the role I imagined for the Commission when I formed it three years ago, a service which I trust will continue to be of great help in the coming years for the Pope, the Holy See, the Bishops and major superiors of the whole world.

Gathered here today, I wish to share with you the profound pain I feel in my soul for the situation of abused children, as I have had occasion to do recently several times. The sexual abuse scandal is indeed a terrible ruin for the whole of humanity, and it affects so many vulnerable children, young people and adults in all countries and in all societies. It has also been a very painful experience for the Church. We are ashamed of the abuses committed by holy ministers, who should be the most trustworthy. But we have also experienced a call, which we are sure comes directly from our Lord Jesus Christ: to embrace the mission of the Gospel for the protection of all vulnerable minors and adults.

Let me say quite clearly that sexual abuse is a horrible sin, completely opposed to and in contradiction to what Christ and the Church teach us. Here in Rome, I have had the privilege of listening to the stories that victims and survivors of abuses have wanted to share. In these encounters, they have openly shared the effects that sexual abuse has had on their lives and those of their families. I know that you too have had the blessed occasion to participate in the same meetings, and that they continue to nourish your personal commitment to do everything

possible to combat this evil and eliminate this ruin among us.

That is why, I reiterate today once again that the Church, at all levels, will respond with the application of the firmest measures to all those who have betrayed their call and abused the children of God. The disciplinary measures that the particular Churches have adopted must apply to all those who work in the institutions of the Church. However, the primary responsibility lies with bishops, priests and religious, those who have received from the Lord the vocation to offer their lives to service, including the vigilant protection of all vulnerable children, young people and adults. Therefore, the Church irrevocably and at all levels seeks to apply the principle of “zero tolerance” against the sexual abuse of minors.

The Motu Proprio *Like a loving mother*, promulgated on the basis of a proposal by your Commission and with reference to the principle of responsibility in the Church, addresses the cases of diocesan bishops, eparchs and major superiors of religious institutes who, through negligence, have carried out or omitted acts that may have caused serious harm to others, whether individuals or a community as a whole (see Article 1).

Over the last three years, the Commission has consistently emphasised the most important principles guiding the Church’s efforts to protect all children and vulnerable adults. In this way, it has fulfilled the mission entrusted to it as “an advisory body at the service of the Holy Father”, offering its experience “for the purposes of promoting local responsibility in the particular Churches for the protection of all minors and vulnerable adults” (Statute, Article 1).

I was delighted to learn that many particular Churches have adopted your recommendation for a Day of Prayer, and for a dialogue with victims and survivors of abuses, as well as with representatives of victim organisations. They shared with us how these meetings have been a profound experience of grace throughout the world, and I sincerely hope that all particular Churches will benefit from them.

It is also encouraging to know how many Episcopal Conferences and Conferences of Major Superiors have sought your advice regarding the Guidelines for the Protection of Minors and Vulnerable Adults. Your collaboration in sharing best practices is truly valuable, especially for those Churches that have fewer resources for this crucial work of protection. I would like to encourage you to continue your collaboration in this work with the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and the Congregation for the Evangelisation of Peoples, so that these practices may be inculturated in the different Churches around the world.

Finally, I would like to praise with special emphasis the numerous opportunities for learning, education and training offered in so many particular Churches throughout the world and also here in Rome, in the various dicasteries of the Holy See, in the course for new bishops and in numerous international congresses. I welcome the news that the presentation made last week to the new bishops by Cardinal O’Malley and Mrs. Marie Collins, one of its founding members, was so favourably received. These educational programs offer the kind of resources that will enable dioceses, religious institutes and all Catholic institutions to adopt and implement the most effective materials for this work.

The Church is called to be a place of piety and compassion, especially for those who have suffered. For all of us, the Catholic Church remains a field hospital that accompanies us on our spiritual journey. It is the place where we can sit with others, listen to them and share with them our struggles and our faith in the good news of Jesus Christ. I am fully confident that the Commission will continue to be a place where we can listen with interest to the voices of the victims and the survivors, as we have much to learn from them and their personal stories of courage and perseverance.

Allow me once again to thank you for your efforts and advice during these three years. I commend you to the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Mother who remains close to us throughout our lives. I give my Apostolic Blessing to all of you and your loved ones, and I ask you to continue to pray for me.

