SALA STAMPA DELLA SANTA SEDE
BOLLETTINO

HOLY SEE PRESS OFFICE BUREAU DE PRESSE DU SAINT-SIÈGE PRESSEAMT DES HEILIGEN STUHLS
OFICINA DE PRENSA DE LA SANTA SEDE SALA DE IMPRENSA DA SANTA SÉ
BIURO PRASOWE STOLICY APOSTOLSKIEJ دار الصحافة التابعة للكرسي الرسولي

N. 190224c

Sunday 24.02.2019

Meeting on “The Protection of Minors in the Church” – The Holy Father Francis’ concluding address at the Meeting on “The Protection of Minors in the Church”

At the end of the Eucharistic Celebration in the Sala Regia of the Vatican Apostolic Palace, the Holy Father Francis gave his concluding address to the presidents of the Episcopal Conferences of the Catholic Church, the heads of the Oriental Catholic Churches, to the representatives of the Union of Superiors General, and the members of the Roman Curia and of the Council of Cardinals who participated in the meeting on “The Protection of Minors in the Church”, which took place in the Vatican from 21 to 24 February 2019.

The following is the Pope’s address to those present:

Concluding address by the Holy Father

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

As I thank the Lord who has accompanied us during these days, I would like to thank all of you for the ecclesial spirit and concrete commitment that you have so generously demonstrated.

Our work has made us realize once again that the gravity of the scourge of the sexual abuse of minors is, and historically has been, a widespread phenomenon in all cultures and societies. Only in relatively recent times has it become the subject of systematic research, thanks to changes in public opinion regarding a problem that was previously considered taboo; everyone knew of its presence yet no one spoke of it. I am reminded too of the cruel religious practice, once widespread in certain cultures, of sacrificing human beings – frequently children – in pagan rites. Yet even today, the statistics available on the sexual abuse of minors drawn up by various national and international organizations and agencies (the WHO, UNICEF, INTERPOL, EUROPOL and others) do not represent the real extent of the phenomenon, which is often underestimated, mainly because many cases of the sexual abuse of minors go unreported,1 particularly the great number committed within families.

Rarely, in fact, do victims speak out and seek help.2 Behind this reluctance there can be shame, confusion, fear of reprisal, various forms of guilt, distrust of institutions, forms of cultural and social conditioning, but also lack of information about services and facilities that can help. Anguish tragically leads to bitterness, even suicide, or at times to seek revenge by doing the same thing. The one thing certain is that millions of children in the world are victims of exploitation and of sexual abuse.

It would be important here to cite the overall data – in my opinion still partial – on the global level,3 then from Europe, Asia, the Americas, Africa and Oceania, in order to give an idea of the gravity and the extent of this plague in our societies.4 To avoid needless quibbling, I would point out from the start that the mention of specific countries is purely for the sake of citing the statistical data provided by the aforementioned reports.

The first truth that emerges from the data at hand is that those who perpetrate *abuse*, that is acts of physical, sexual or emotional violence, are primarily *parents, relatives, husbands of child brides, coaches and teachers*. Furthermore, according to the UNICEF data of 2017 regarding 28 countries throughout the world, 9 out of every 10 girls who have had forced sexual relations reveal that they were victims of someone they knew or who was close to their family.

According to official data of the American government, in the United States over 700,000 children each year are victims of acts of violence and mistreatment. According to the International Centre for Missing and Exploited Children (ICMEC), 1 out of every 10 children experiences sexual abuse. In Europe, 18 million children are victims of sexual abuse.5

If we take *Italy* as an example, the 2016 *Telefono Azzurro* Report states that 68.9% of abuses take place within the *home* of the minor.6

Acts of violence take place not only in the home, but also in neighbourhoods, schools, athletic facilities7 and, sadly, also in church settings.

Research conducted in recent years on the phenomenon of the sexual abuse of minors also shows that the development of the web and of the communications media have contributed to a significant increase in cases of abuse and acts of violence perpetrated online. Pornography is rapidly spreading worldwide through the net. The scourge of pornography has expanded to an alarming degree, causing psychological harm and damaging relations between men and women, and between adults and children. It is a phenomenon in constant growth. Tragically, a considerable part of pornographic production has to do with minors, who are thus gravely violated in their dignity. The studies in this field – it is sad - document that it is happening in ever more horrible and violent ways, even to the point of acts of abuse against minors being commissioned and viewed live over the net.8

Here I would mention the World Congress held in Rome on the theme of child dignity in the digital era, as well as the first Forum of the Interfaith Alliance for Safer Communities held on the same theme in Abu Dhabi last November.

Another scourge is *sexual tourism*. According to 2017 data provided by the World Tourism Organization, each year *3 million* people throughout the world travel in order to have sexual relations with a minor.9 Significantly, the perpetrators of these crimes in most cases do not even realize that they are committing a criminal offence.

We are thus facing a universal problem, tragically present almost everywhere and affecting everyone. Yet we need to be clear, that while gravely affecting our societies as a whole,10 this evil is in no way less monstrous when it takes place within the Church.

The brutality of this worldwide phenomenon becomes all the more grave and scandalous in the Church, for it is utterly incompatible with her moral authority and ethical credibility. 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. 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. We need to recognize with humility and courage that we stand face to face with the mystery of evil, which strikes most violently against the most vulnerable, for they are an image of Jesus. For this reason, the Church has now become increasingly aware of the need not only to curb the gravest cases of abuse by disciplinary measures and civil and canonical processes, but also to decisively confront the phenomenon both inside and outside the Church. She feels called to combat this evil that strikes at the very heart of her mission, which is to preach the Gospel to the little ones and to protect them from ravenous wolves.

Here again I would state clearly: if in the Church there should emerge even a single case of abuse – which already in itself represents an atrocity – that case will be faced with the utmost seriousness. Brothers and Sisters: in people's justified anger, the Church sees the reflection of the wrath of God, betrayed and insulted by these deceitful consecrated persons. The echo of the silent cry of the little ones who, instead of finding in them fathers and spiritual guides encountered tormentors, will shake hearts dulled by hypocrisy and by power. It is our duty to pay close heed to this silent, choked cry.

It is difficult to grasp the phenomenon of the sexual abuse of minors without considering power, since it is always the result of an abuse of power, an exploitation of the inferiority and vulnerability of the abused, which makes possible the manipulation of their conscience and of their psychological and physical weakness. The abuse of power is likewise present in the other forms of abuse affecting almost 85,000,000 children, forgotten by everyone: child soldiers, child prostitutes, starving children, children kidnapped and often victimized by the horrid commerce of human organs or enslaved, child victims of war, refugee children, aborted children and so many others.

Before all this cruelty, all this idolatrous sacrifice of children to the god of power, money, pride and arrogance, empirical explanations alone are not sufficient. They fail to make us grasp the breadth and depth of this tragedy. Here once again we see the limitations of a purely positivistic approach. It can provide us with a true *explanation* helpful for taking necessary measures, but it is incapable of giving us a *meaning*. Today we need both *explanation* and *meaning*. Explanation will help us greatly in the operative sphere, but will take us only halfway.

So what would be the existential "meaning" of this criminal phenomenon? In the light of its human breadth and depth, it is none other than the present-day manifestation of the spirit of evil. If we fail to take account of this dimension, we will remain far from the truth and lack real solutions.

Brothers and sisters, today we find ourselves before a manifestation of brazen, aggressive and destructive evil. Behind and within, there is the spirit of evil, which in its pride and in its arrogance considers itself the Lord of the world11 and thinks that it has triumphed. I would like to say this to you with the authority of a brother and a father, certainly a small one and a sinner, but who is the pastor of the Church that presides in charity: in these painful cases, I see the hand of evil that does not spare even the innocence of the little ones. And this leads me to think of the example of Herod who, driven by fear of losing his power, ordered the slaughter of all the children of Bethlehem.12 Behind this there is satan.

Just as we must take every practical measure that common sense, the sciences and society offer us, neither must we lose sight of this reality; we need to take up the spiritual means that the Lord himself teaches us: humiliation, self-accusation, prayer and penance. This is the only way to overcome the spirit of evil. It is how Jesus himself overcame it.13

The Church's aim will thus be to hear, watch over, protect and care for abused, exploited and forgotten children, wherever they are. To achieve that goal, the Church must rise above the ideological disputes and journalistic practices that often exploit, for various interests, the very tragedy experienced by the little ones.

The time has come, then, to work together to eradicate this evil from the body of our humanity by adopting every necessary measure already in force on the international level and ecclesial levels. The time has come to find a correct equilibrium of all values in play and to provide uniform directives for the Church, avoiding the two extremes of a "*justicialism*" provoked by guilt for past errors and media pressure, and a *defensiveness* that fails

to confront the causes and effects of these grave crimes.

In this context, I would mention the “best practices” formulated under the guidance of the World Health Organization14 by a group of ten international bodies that developed and approved a packet of measures called INSPIRE: *Seven Strategies for Ending Violence against Children*.15

With the help of these guidelines, the work carried out in recent years by the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors and the contributions made by this Meeting, the Church, in developing her legislation, will concentrate on the following aspects:

1. *The protection of children*. The primary goal of every measure must be to protect the little ones and prevent them from falling victim to any form of psychological and physical abuse. Consequently, a change of mentality is needed to combat a defensive and reactive approach to protecting the institution and to pursue, wholeheartedly and decisively, the good of the community by giving priority to the victims of abuse in every sense. We must keep ever before us the innocent faces of the little ones, remembering the words of the Master: “Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea. Woe to the world because of scandals! For it is necessary that scandals come, but woe to the man by whom the scandal comes! (*Mt* 18:6-7).

2. *Impeccable seriousness*. Here I would reaffirm that “the Church will spare no effort to do all that is necessary to bring to justice *whosoever* has committed such crimes. The Church will never seek to hush up or not take seriously any case” (*Address to the Roman Curia*, 21 December 2018). She is convinced that “the sins and crimes of consecrated persons are further tainted by infidelity and shame; they disfigure the countenance of the Church and undermine her credibility. The Church herself, with her faithful children, is also a victim of these acts of infidelity and these real sins of “peculation” (ibid.).

3. *Genuine purification.* Notwithstanding the measures already taken and the progress made in the area of preventing abuse, there is need for a constantly renewed commitment to the holiness of pastors, whose conformity to Christ the Good Shepherd is a right of the People of God. The Church thus restates “her firm resolve to pursue unstintingly a path of purification, questioning how best to protect children, to avoid these tragedies, to bring healing and restoration to the victims, and to improve the training imparted in seminaries… An effort will be made to make past mistakes opportunities for eliminating this scourge, not only from the body of the Church but also from that of society” (ibid.). The holy fear of God leads us to accuse ourselves – as individuals and as an institution – and to make up for our failures. Self-accusation is the beginning of wisdom and bound to the holy fear of God: learning how to accuse ourselves, as individuals, as institutions, as a society. For we must not fall into the trap of blaming others, which is a step towards the “alibi” that separates us from reality.

4. *Formation*. In other words, requiring criteria for the selection and training of candidates to the priesthood that are not simply negative, concerned above all with excluding problematic personalities, but also positive, providing a balanced process of formation for suitable candidates, fostering holiness and the virtue of chastity. Saint Paul VI, in his encyclical *Sacerdotalis Caelibatus*, wrote that “the life of the celibate priest, which engages the whole man so totally and so sensitively, excludes those of insufficient physical, psychic and moral qualifications. Nor should anyone pretend that grace supplies for the defects of nature in such a man” (No. 64).

5. *Strengthening and reviewing guidelines by Episcopal Conferences*. In other words, reaffirming the need for bishops to be united in the application of parameters that serve as rules and not simply indications. Rules, not simply indications. No abuse should ever be covered up (as was often the case in the past) or not taken sufficiently seriously, since the covering up of abuses favours the spread of evil and adds a further level of scandal. Also and in particular, developing new and effective approaches for prevention in all institutions and in every sphere of ecclesial activity.

6. *Accompaniment of those who have been abused*. The evil that they have experienced leaves them with indelible wounds that also manifest themselves in resentment and a tendency to self-destruction. The Church thus has the duty to provide them with all the support they need, by availing herself of experts in this field.

Listening, let me even put it this way: “wasting time” in listening. Listening heals the hurting person, and likewise heals us of our egoism, aloofness and lack of concern, of the attitude shown by the priest and the Levite in the parable of the Good Samaritan.

7. *The digital world.* The protection of minors must take into account the new forms of sexual abuse and abuse of all kinds that threaten minors in the settings in which they live and through the new devices that they use. Seminarians, priests, men and women religious, pastoral agents, indeed everyone, must be aware that the digital world and the use of its devices often has a deeper effect than we may think. Here there is a need to encourage countries and authorities to apply every measure needed to contain those websites that threaten human dignity, the dignity of women and particularly that of children. Brothers and Sisters: crime does not enjoy the right to freedom. There is an absolute need to combat these abominations with utter determination, to be vigilant and to make every effort to keep the development of young people from being troubled or disrupted by an uncontrolled access to pornography, which will leave deep scars on their minds and hearts. We must ensure that young men and women, particularly seminarians and clergy, are not enslaved to addictions based on the exploitation and criminal abuse of the innocent and their pictures, and contempt for the dignity of women and of the human person. Here mention should be made of the new norms on *graviora delicta* approved by Pope Benedict XVI in 2010, which included as a new species of crime “the acquisition, possession or distribution by a cleric of pornographic images of minors… by whatever means or using whatever technology”. The text speaks of minors “under the age of fourteen”. We now consider that this age limit should be raised in order to expand the protection of minors and to bring out the gravity of these deeds.

8. *Sexual tourism*. The conduct, the way of looking at others, the very heart of Jesus’ disciples and servants must always acknowledge the image of God in each human creature, beginning with the most innocent. It is only by drawing from this radical respect for the dignity of others that we will be able to defend them from the pervasive power of violence, exploitation, abuse and corruption, and serve them in a credible way in their integral human and spiritual growth, in the encounter with others and with God. Combatting sexual tourism demands that it be outlawed, but also that the victims of this criminal phenomenon be given support and helped to be reinserted in society. The ecclesial communities are called to strengthen their pastoral care of persons exploited by sexual tourism. Among these, those who are most vulnerable and in need of particular help are certainly women, minors and children; these last however need special forms of protection and attention. Government authorities should make this a priority and act with urgency to combat the trafficking and economic exploitation of children. To this end it is important to coordinate the efforts being made at every level of society and to cooperate closely with international organizations so as to achieve a juridical framework capable of protecting children from sexual exploitation in tourism and of ensuring the legal prosecution of offenders.16

Allow me now to offer a heartfelt word of thanks to all those priests and consecrated persons who serve the Lord faithfully and totally, and who feel themselves dishonoured and discredited by the shameful conduct of some of their confreres. All of us – the Church, consecrated persons, the People of God, and even God himself – bear the effects of their infidelity. In the name of the whole Church, I thank the vast majority of priests who are not only faithful to their celibacy, but spend themselves in a ministry today made even more difficult by the scandals of few (but always too many) of their confreres. I also thank the faithful who are well aware of the goodness of their pastors and who continue to pray for them and to support them.

Finally, I would like to stress the important need to turn this evil into an opportunity for purification. Let us look to the example of Edith Stein – Saint Teresa Benedicta of the Cross – with the certainty that “in the darkest night, the greatest prophets and saints rise up. Still, the life-giving stream of the mystical life remains invisible. Surely, the decisive events of history of the world have been essentially influenced by souls about whom the history books remain silent. And those souls that we must thank for the decisive events in our personal lives is something that we will know only on that day when all that which is hidden will be brought to light”. The holy, faithful People of God, in its daily silence, in many forms and ways continues to demonstrate and attest with “stubborn” hope that the Lord never abandons but sustains the constant and, in so many cases, painful devotion of his children. The holy and patient, faithful People of God, borne up and enlivened by the Holy Spirit, is the best face of the prophetic Church which puts her Lord at the centre in daily giving of herself. It will be precisely this holy People of God to liberate us from the plague of clericalism, which is the fertile ground for all these disgraces.

The best results and the most effective resolution that we can offer to the victims, to the People of Holy Mother Church and to the entire world, are the commitment to personal and collective conversion, the humility of learning, listening, assisting and protecting the most vulnerable.

I make a heartfelt appeal for an all-out battle against the abuse of minors both sexually and in other areas, on the part of all authorities and individuals, for we are dealing with abominable crimes that must be erased from the face of the earth: this is demanded by all the many victims hidden in families and in the various settings of our societies.

---

[1] Cf. MARIA ISABEL MARTÍNEZ PÉREZ, *Abusos sexuales en niños y adolescentes*, ed. Criminología y Justicia, 2012, according to which only 2% of cases are reported, especially when the abuse has taken place in the home. She sets the number of victims of paedophilia in our society at between 15% and 20%. Only 50% of children reveal the abuses they have suffered, and of these cases only 15% are actually reported. Only 5% end up going to trial.

[2] One out of three mentions the fact to no one (2017 data compiled by the non-profit organization THORN).

[3] *On the global level:* in 2017 the World Health Organization estimated that up to 1 billion minors between 2 and 17 years of age have experienced acts of violence or physical, emotional or sexual neglect. Sexual abuse (ranging from groping to rape), according to some 2014 UNICEF estimates, would affect 120 million girls, who are the greatest number of victims. In 2017, UNICEF reported that in 38 of the world's low to middle income countries, almost 17 million adult women admitted having had a forced sexual relation in childhood.

Europe: in 2013, the World Health Organization estimated over 18 million of abuses. According to UNICEF, in 28 European countries, about 2.5 million young women reported having experienced sexual abuse with or without physical contact prior to 15 years of age (data released in 2017). In addition, 44 million (equivalent to 22.9%) were victims of physical violence, while 55 million (29.6%) were victims of psychological violence. Not only this: in 2017, the INTERPOL Report on the sexual exploitation of minors led to the identification of 14,289 victims in 54 European countries. With regard to Italy, in 2017 CESVI estimated that 6 million children experienced mistreatment. Furthermore, according to data provided by Telefono Azzurro, in the calendar year 2017, 98 cases of sexual abuse and pedophilia were handled by the Servizio 114 Emergenza Infanzia, equivalent to about 7.5% of the total cases handled by that service. 65% of the minors seeking help were female victims and over 40% were under 11 years of age.

Asia: in India, in the decade 2001-2011, the Asian Centre for Human Rights reported a total of 48,338 cases of the rape of minors, with an increase equivalent to 336% over that period: the 2,113 cases in 2001 rose to 7,112 cases in 2011.

The Americas: in the United States, official government data state that more than 700,000 children each year are victims of violence and mistreatment. According to the International Centre for Missing and Exploited Children (ICMEC), 1 out of every 10 children experiences sexual abuse.

Africa: in South Africa, the results of a study conducted by the Centre for Justice and Crime Prevention of the University of Cape Town showed in 2016 that 1 out of 3 South African young people, male or female, risks being sexually abused before the age of 17. According to the study, the first of its kind on a national scale in South Africa, 784,967 young people between 15 and 17 years of age have already experienced sexual abuse. The victims in this case are for the most part male youths. Not even a third of them reported the violence to the authorities. In other African countries, cases of sexual abuse of minors are part of the wider context of acts of violence linked to the conflicts affecting the continent and are thus difficult to quantify. The phenomenon is also closely linked to the widespread practice of underage marriages in various African nations, as elsewhere.

Oceania: in Australia, according to data issued by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) in February 2018 and covering the years 2015-2017, one out of six women (16%, i.e., 1.5 million) reported experiencing physical and/or sexual abuse prior to 15 years of age, and one out of nine men (11%, i.e., 992,000) reported having experienced this abuse when they were children. Also, in 2015-2016, around 450,000 children were the object of child protection measures, and 55,600 minors were removed from their homes in order to remedy abuses they had suffered and to prevent others. Finally, one must not forget the risks to which native minors are exposed: again, according to AIHW, in 2015-2016 indigenous children had a seven times greater probability of being abused or abandoned as compared with their non-indigenous contemporaries (cf. http://www.pbc2019.org/protection-of-minors/child-abuse-on-the-global-level).

[4] The data provided refer to sample counties selected on the basis of the reliability of available sources. The studies released by UNICEF on 30 countries confirm this fact: a small percentage of victims stated that they had asked for help.

[5]Cf.https://www.repubblica.it/salute/prevenzione/2016/05/12/news/maltrattamenti_sui_minori_tutti_gli_abusi-139630223.

[6] Specifically, those allegedly responsible for the difficulties experienced by a minor are, in 73.7% of the cases a parent (the mother in 44.2% and the father in 29.5%), a relative (3.3%), a friend (3.2%), an acquaintance (3%), a teacher (2.5%). The data show that only in a small percentage of cases (2.2%) is the person responsible an adult stranger. Cf. ibid.

[7] A 2011 English study carried out by the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) found that 29% of those interviewed reported that they had experienced sexual molestation (physical and verbal) in sports centres.

[8] According to the 2017 data of the Internet Watch Foundation (IWF), every 7 minutes a web page sends pictures of sexually abused children. In 2017, 78,589 URLs were found to contain images of sexual abuse concentrated particularly in the Low Countries, followed by the United States, Canada, France and Russia. 55% of the victims were under 10 years of age, 86% were girls, 7% boys and 5% both.

[9] The most frequented destinations are Brazil, the Dominican Republic, Colombia, as well as Thailand and Cambodia. These have recently been joined by some countries of Africa and Eastern Europe. On the other hand, the six countries from which the perpetrators of abuse mostly come are France, Germany, the United Kingdom, China, Japan and Italy. Not to be overlooked is the growing number of women who travel to developing countries in search of paid sex with minors: in total, they represent 10% of sexual tourists worldwide. Furthermore, according to a study by ECPAT (End Child Prostitution in Asian Tourism) International, between 2015 and 2016, 35% of paedophile sexual tourists were regular clients, while 65% were occasional clients (cf. https://www.osservatoriodiritti.it/2018/03/27/turismo-sessuale-minorile-nel-mondo-italia-ecpat).

[10] “For if this grave tragedy has involved some consecrated ministers, we may ask how deeply rooted it may be in our societies and in our families” (*Address to the Roman Curia*, 21 December 2018).

[11] Cf. R.H. BENSON, *The Lord of the World*, Dodd, Mead and Company, London, 1907.

[12] “Quare times, Herodes, quia audis Regem natum? Non venit ille ut te excludat, sed ut diabolum vincat. Sed tu haec non intelligens turbaris et saevis; et ut perdas unum quem quaeris, per tot infantium mortes efficeris crudelis… Necas parvulos corpore quia te necat timor in corde (SAINT QUODVULTDEUS, *Sermo 2 de Symbolo:* PL 40, 655).

[13] “Quemadmodum enim ille, effuso in scientiae lignum veneno suo, naturam gusto corruperat, sic et ipse dominicam carnem vorandam praesumens, deitatis in ea virtute corruptus interituque sublatus est” (SAINT MAXIMUS THE CONFESSOR, *Centuria* 1, 8-3: PG 90, 1182-1186).

[14] (CDC: United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention; CRC: Convention on the Rights of

the Child; End Violence Against Children: The Global Partnership; PAHO: Pan American Health Organization; PEPFAR: President's Emergency Program for AIDS Relief; TfG: Together for Girls; UNICEF: United Nations Children's Fund; UNODC: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime; USAID:

United States Agency for International Development; WHO: World Health Organization).

[15] Each letter of the word *INSPIRE* represents one of the strategies, and for the most part has shown to be preventively effectual against various types of violence, in addition to having benefits in areas such as mental health, education and the reduction of crime. The seven strategies are the following: *Implementation and Enforcement of Laws* (for example, avoiding violent discipline and limiting access to alcohol and firearms); *Norms and Values* that need changing (for example, those that condone sexual abuse against girls or aggressive behaviour among boys); *Safe Environments* (for example, identifying neighbourhood violence "hotspots" and dealing with local causes through policies that resolve problems and through other interventions); *Parent and Caregiver Support* (for example, by providing formation to parents for their children, and to new parents); *Income and Economic Strengthening* (such as microcredit and formation concerning equity in general); *Response and Support Services* (for example, ensuring that children exposed to violence can have access to effective emergency care and can receive adequate psychosocial support); *Education and Life Skills* (for example, ensuring that children attend school and equipping them with social skills).

[16] Cf. *Final Document of the VI World Congress on the Pastoral Care of Tourism*, 27 July 2004.