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BIURO PRASOWE STOLICY APOSTOLSKIEJ دار الصحافة التابعة للكرسي الرسولي

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

This morning, the Holy Father Francis received in audience the members of the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors, at the end of the Plenary Assembly, to whom he addressed the following words:

Address of the Holy Father

Dear brothers and sisters, good day! Welcome!

I am pleased to welcome you at the conclusion of your plenary meeting. I thank Cardinal O'Malley for his words of introduction, and I thank all of you for your commitment to the work of protecting children, both in your professional lives and in your service to the faithful. Today, thanks also to your efforts, minors and vulnerable persons are safer in the Church. I would also like to thank Cardinal O'Malley for the tenacity with which he has pursued this cause despite every obstacle. Thank you!

The service entrusted to you is one that must be carried out with care. Constant attention is required of the Commission so that the Church may not only be a safe place for minors and a place of healing, but may prove completely trustworthy in promoting their rights worldwide. Sadly, situations continue to exist where the dignity of children is threatened, and this must be a source of concern for all the faithful and for all people of good will.

At times, the reality of abuse and its devastating and lasting effects on the life of the "little ones" seem to prevail over the efforts of those who strive to respond with love and understanding. The path to healing is a long and difficult one; it requires firm hope, hope in Christ who went to the cross and even beyond the cross. The risen Jesus bears, and will always bear, the marks of his crucifixion on his glorified body. Those wounds tell us that God saves us not by passing over our sufferings but by *passing through* those sufferings, transforming them by the power of his love. The healing power of the Holy Spirit does not disappoint; God's promise of new life does not fail. We need but have faith in the risen Jesus and repose our lives in the wounds of his risen body.

Abuse in any form is unacceptable. The sexual abuse of children is particularly grave, as an offence against a

life that is just beginning to flower. Instead of flourishing, one who is abused is deeply injured, at times permanently. Recently I received a letter from a father whose son had been abused and as a result for many years could not even leave his room, so profound were the effects of the abuse on him, and on his family as well. Those who were abused sometimes feel, as it were, trapped between life and death. These are realities that, painful as they are, we cannot take away.

The testimony of the survivors represents an open wound on the body of Christ, which is the Church. I urge you to work diligently and courageously to make these wounds known, to seek out those who suffer from them, and to recognize in those persons the witness of our suffering Saviour. For the Church knows the risen Lord to the extent that she follows him as the suffering Servant. This is the road that all of us must take: bishops, religious superiors, priests, deacons, consecrated persons, catechists and lay faithful. Each member of the Church, in accord with his or her proper state, is called to assume responsibility for preventing cases of abuse and to work for justice and for healing.

Now I would like to say a word regarding your future. With the Apostolic Constitution *Praedicate Evangelium*, as the Cardinal mentioned, I formally instituted the Commission as part of the Roman Curia, within the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith (cf. No. 78). Someone might think that this could put at risk your freedom of thought and action, or even take away importance from the issue with which you deal. That is not my intention, nor is it my expectation. And I invite you to be watchful that this does not happen.

The Commission for the Protection of Minors is instituted within the Dicastery that deals with sexual abuse on the part of members of the clergy. Nonetheless, I have made your leadership and personnel distinct, and you will continue to relate directly with me through your President Delegate. It was placed there, because it was not possible to have a “satellite commission”, circling around but unattached to the organization chart. It is there, but with its own President, appointed by the Pope. I would like you to propose better methods to enable the Church to protect minors and vulnerable persons and to assist the healing of survivors, in the recognition that justice and prevention are complementary. Indeed, your service provides a proactive and prospective vision of the best practices and procedures that can be implemented in the entire Church.

In many places, important seeds have been sown in this regard, yet much remains to be done. The Apostolic Constitution marks a new beginning. It put you in the Curia’s organization chart within that Dicastery, but independent, with a President appointed by the Pope. Independent. It is your responsibility to expand the scope of this mission in such a way that the protection and care of those who have experienced abuse may become normative in every sector of the Church’s life. Your close collaboration with the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith and with other Dicasteries ought to enrich your work, while your work can enrich in turn that of the Curia and the local Churches. The determination of the most effective ways for this to happen I leave to the Commission and to the Dicastery, to the Dicasteries. Working together, these concretely implement the Church’s duty to protect all those for whom she is responsible. That duty is grounded in the conception of the human person in his or her intrinsic dignity, with special concern for the most vulnerable. The efforts made on the level of the universal Church and of the Particular Churches will implement the plan of protection, healing and justice, in accord with their respective competences.

The seeds that have been sown are starting to bear good fruit. Cases of the abuse of minors by members of the clergy have decreased for several years now in those parts of the world where data and reliable resources are available. I would like you, on an annual basis, to prepare for me a report on the Church’s initiatives for the protection of minors and vulnerable adults. This might be difficult at the beginning, but I ask you to begin where necessary, in order to furnish a reliable account on what is presently being done and what needs to change, so that the competent authorities can act. This report will be a factor of transparency and accountability and – I hope – will provide a clear audit of our progress in this effort. Without that progress, the faithful will continue to lose trust in their pastors, and preaching and witnessing to the Gospel will become increasingly difficult.

There are also certain more immediate needs that the Commission can help to meet, especially for the welfare and pastoral care of persons who have experienced abuse. I have followed with interest the ways that the Commission, from its inception, has provided opportunities for listening and encounter with victims and

survivors. You have been of great help in my pastoral mission to all those who have turned to me following their painful experiences. For this reason, I urge you to assist the Conferences of Bishops – this is very important: to assist and oversee in dialogue with the Conferences of Bishops – in establishing suitable centres where individuals who have experienced abuse, and their family members, can find acceptance and an attentive hearing, and be accompanied in a process of healing and justice, as indicated in the *Motu Proprio Vos Estis Lux Mundi* (cf. Art. 2). This effort will also be an expression of the Church's synodal nature, of communion and subsidiarity. Do not forget the meeting we had almost three years ago with the Presidents of the Conferences of Bishops. They are to establish commissions and the means needed to implement processes of care for persons who have been abused, with all the methods that you have, and for punishing abusers. And you must oversee this. I encourage you, please.

Dear brothers and sisters, I offer you my heartfelt thanks for the work that you have done. I pray for you and I ask you to pray for me, because this work is not easy. Thank you! May God continue to pour out upon you his abundant blessings. God bless you! Thank you!
