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# **BOLLETTINO**

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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.

The following is the address delivered by the Holy Father to those present:

### **Address of the Holy Father**

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

I am pleased to welcome all of you, particularly the new members of the Commission, as well as those continuing their service and the group of associates from around the world, who are a new and welcome addition.

This is our first meeting since you were formally established within the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, and I would like to provide you with some suggestions. The seeds sown some ten years ago, when the Council of Cardinals recommended the creation of this body, are bearing fruit, as we can see. In order to face today's challenges with wisdom and courage, it is important to pause for a moment and reflect on the past. Over the last decade, we have all learned a great deal, myself included!

The sexual abuse of minors by clergy and its poor handling by Church leaders has been one of the greatest challenges for the Church in our time. Many of you have committed your lives to this cause. War, hunger and indifference to the suffering of others are terrible problems in our world, and they cry out to heaven. Yet the sexual abuse crisis is particularly serious for the Church, because it undermines her ability to fully embrace and bear witness to God's liberating presence. The failure to act properly to halt this evil and to assist its victims has sullied our witness to God's love. In the *Confiteor*, we ask forgiveness not only for the wrong we have done, but also for the good we have failed to do. It can be easy to forget sins of omission, for in a way they seem less real; yet in fact they are very real, and they hurt the community as much as others, if not more so.

The failure, especially on the part of the Church's leaders, to do what we should have done, has been a cause of scandal for many; in recent years, awareness of this problem has spread to the entire Christian community. Yet, at the same time, we have not remained silent or inactive. Recently, I confirmed the *Motu Proprio Vos Estis Lux Mundi* (VELM), which is now permanently in place. The *Motu Proprio* calls, in particular, for setting aside places for receiving accusations and caring for those who report that they have been harmed (cf. Art. 2). To be sure, improvements can be made on the basis of experience, by Episcopal Conferences and individual bishops.

No one today can honestly claim to be unaffected by the reality of sexual abuse in the Church. In your work of addressing this multi-faceted issue, I would ask you to bear in mind the following three principles and to consider them as part of a *spirituality of reparation*.

1. First, where harm was done to people's lives, we are called to keep in mind God's creative power to make hope emerge from despair and life from death. The terrible sense of loss that many experience as a result of abuse can sometimes seem a burden too heavy to bear. Church leaders, who share a sense of shame for their failure to act, have suffered a loss of credibility, and our very ability to preach the Gospel has been damaged. Yet the Lord, who brings about new birth in every age, can restore life to dry bones (cf. *Ezek 37:6*). Even when the path forward is difficult and demanding, I urge you not to get bogged down; keep reaching out, keep trying to instill confidence in those you meet and who share with you this common cause. Do not grow discouraged when it seems that little is changing for the better. Persevere and keep moving forwards!

2. Secondly, sexual abuse has opened many wounds in our world, not only in the Church. Many victims continue to suffer the effects of abuse that took place years ago, yet continues to be an obstacle and a source of brokenness in their lives. The consequences of abuse make themselves felt in relationships between spouses, parents and children, brothers and sisters, friends and colleagues. Communities are traumatized; the insidious nature of abuse creates devastation and division in people's hearts and their relationships.

Yet our lives are not meant to remain divided. What is broken must not stay broken. From the world of nature, we learn that every part of our lives is interconnected, and the life of faith connects this world with the world to come. Everything is interconnected. The mission Jesus received from his Father is to ensure that nothing and no one is lost (cf. *Jn 6:39*). Where life is broken, then, I ask you to help put pieces back together, in the hope that what is broken can be repaired.

Recently I met with a group of survivors of abuse, who had asked to meet with the leadership of the religious institute that ran the school they attended around fifty years ago. I mention this because they discussed it openly. All of them were elderly and some of them, realizing that time is passing quickly, expressed their wish to live out their remaining years in peace. For them, peace meant resuming their relationship with the Church that had hurt them. They wanted closure not only for the evil they had suffered, but also for the questions that had haunted them ever since. They wanted to be heard and believed; they wanted someone to help them to understand. We talked together and they had the courage to open up. In particular, the daughter of one of them spoke of the impact of her father's experience on their entire family. Mending the torn fabric of past experience is a redemptive act, the act of the suffering Servant, who did not avoid pain, but took upon himself the iniquity of us all (cf. *Is 53:1-14*). This is the path of healing and redemption: the path of Christ's cross. In that specific case, I can say that for these survivors there was a real dialogue during those meetings, at the end of which they said they felt welcomed like brothers and sisters, and regained a sense of hope for the future.

3. Third, I encourage you to cultivate an approach that mirrors the respect and kindness of God himself. The American poet and activist Maya Angelou once wrote: "I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel". So be gentle in your actions, bearing one another's burdens (cf. *Gal 6:1-2*), without complaining, but considering that this moment of reparation for the Church will give way to a further moment in the history of salvation. The living God has not exhausted his sources of grace and blessing! Let us not forget that the wounds of the Passion remained on the body of the risen Christ, no longer as a source of suffering or shame, but as signs of mercy and transformation.

Now is the time to repair the damage done to previous generations and to those who continue to suffer. This

Easter season is a sign that a new time is being prepared for us, a new springtime, made fruitful by the work and tears we share with those who have suffered. That is why it is important that we never stop pressing ahead.

You are using your skills and expertise to help repair a terrible scourge in the Church by working to assist the various particular Churches. From the ordinary life of a diocese in its parishes and seminary, to the training of catechists, teachers and other pastoral workers, the importance of safeguarding minors and vulnerable persons must be the rule for everyone. In this regard, in religious and apostolic life, even cloistered novices must adhere to the same ministerial standards as their elderly brothers and sisters who spent a lifetime teaching the young.

The principles of respect for the dignity of all, for right conduct and a sound way of life must become a universal rule, independent of people's culture or economic and social condition. All the Church's ministers must respect this rule in the way they serve the faithful, and they in turn must be treated with respect and dignity by those who lead the community. Indeed, a culture of safeguarding will only take root if there is a pastoral conversion in this regard among the Church's leaders.

I am encouraged by your plans for addressing inequalities within the Church through training programmes and assistance to victims, in Africa, Asia and Latin America. It is not right that the most prosperous areas of the world should have well-trained and well-funded safeguarding programmes, where victims and their families are respected, while in other parts of the world they suffer in silence, perhaps rejected or stigmatized when they try to come forward to tell of the abuse they have suffered. Here too, the Church must seek to be a model of acceptance and good practice.

Efforts to improve guidelines and standards for the conduct of clergy and religious must continue. I ask you to keep me informed of these efforts, and to offer an annual report on what you consider to be working well or otherwise, so that appropriate changes can be made.

Last year I encouraged you to share your expertise on the various ways in which you believe the work of the Roman Curia can help in the protection of minors, as a source of reciprocal enrichment in your new role. I was pleased to learn of your cooperation agreement with the Dicastery for Evangelization, given its vast outreach to many of the world's most distant areas.

You have already done much in these first six months. I bless you from my heart. Know that I am close to your work; and please, remember to pray for me, as I will for you.

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