

'God weeps,' says pope, calling for accountability on sex abuse crimes

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PHILADELPHIA (RNS) Pope Francis began the final day of his U.S. visit by meeting privately with five adults abused as children by clergy, teachers, or family members, telling them they should expect the church to look after them and vowing “the zealous vigilance of the church to protect children and the promise of accountability for all,” including bishops.

“For those who were abused by a member of the clergy, I am deeply sorry for the times when you or your family spoke out, to report the abuse, but you were not heard or believed. Please know that the Holy Father hears and believes you,” he told the three women and two men at the private meeting at a seminary here on Sunday morning (September 27).

A leading victims’ advocacy group in the U.S. quickly dismissed the meeting as another “feel good, do nothing” papal meeting with survivors. This is the second time Francis has met with survivors; the first was in the Vatican in July last year.

According to the Vatican’s account of the meeting, Francis expressed “deep regret” that some bishops shielded abusive priests, and added: “I pledge to you that we will follow the path of truth wherever it may lead. Clergy and bishops will be held accountable when they abuse or fail to protect children.”

The pope praised the witness of the survivors, who were not identified, and said their presence was “so generously given despite the anger and pain you have experienced.”

In later remarks to a group of bishops, he called the survivors “heralds of hope and ministers of mercy”—mercy being a key theme of Francis’ efforts to make the church more open and inclusive.

“I remain overwhelmed with shame that men entrusted with the tender care of children violated these little ones and caused grievous harm. I am profoundly sorry. God weeps,” Francis told the bishops in an unscripted start to his speech to them Sunday morning.

Concluding his brief remarks in English to the survivors, the pontiff compared the church to the disciples who asked Jesus to stay with them, and he said: “Like those disciples, I humbly beg you and all survivors of abuse to stay with us, to stay with the church.”

In the weeks leading up to this U.S. trip, church officials said Francis wanted to meet with survivors on this visit. But many survivors’ groups and their allies denounced the prospect of such a meeting as a “publicity stunt” that would have little impact on church policy or on protecting children.

There were some indications that Boston Cardinal Sean O’Malley, a close adviser to the pope and point man on the church’s increasingly vigorous response to the abuse crisis, was having difficulty finding U.S. survivors who would meet with the pope.

It was notable that not all the survivors were abused by clergy, and that some were assaulted by teachers or family members. Church officials said Sunday that the composition of the group of survivors—two or three of the five had been abused by clergy—was also a sign that the Catholic Church wants to focus on the prevalence of abuse in other areas beyond religious groups.

Francis, accompanied by O’Malley and Philadelphia Archbishop Charles Chaput, greeted each survivors, plus a relative or support person who was with them, and prayed with them individually. The entire encounter lasted about a half an hour.

David Clohessy, director of SNAP, the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests, had been critical of the proposed meeting and what he heard of Sunday morning’s encounter did not change his mind.

“Is a child anywhere on earth safer now that a pope, for maybe the seventh or eighth time or ninth time, has briefly chatted with abuse victims? No,” Clohessy said in a statement. “A smart public relations move. That’s what this meeting is. Nothing more.”

Francis' predecessor, Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, met five times with victims during his eight years as pope, including a meeting during his 2008 visit to the U.S., which in many ways was the epicenter of a scandal that has spread across the globe.

While Benedict, who initially downplayed the extent of the scandal, was credited for eventually doing more on the crisis than the late John Paul II, there was still a clamor for the Vatican to take the further step of holding bishops accountable.

After a slow start responding to the crisis following his March 2013 election, Francis has taken significant new steps, creating a Vatican commission to propose global policies for the church and naming two victims along with lay experts and church officials in equal numbers.

Marie Collins of Ireland, a survivor who is on the commission, wrote on Twitter after reading about Sunday's meeting that "like most survivors it is the actions following the words I feel are most important."

In June, Francis also announced that he was creating the first-ever system for judging, and possibly deposing, bishops who fail to protect children from abusive clerics. In separate moves, the pope also forced the resignation of two U.S. bishops who had failed to discipline predator priests.

Collins wrote that "we need to see the new tribunal up and running ... before anyone can be sure how things will develop as we go forward."

In other respects, Francis' record remains open to criticism.

He sparked a furor in Chile when he named a bishop there who many believe had knowledge of a priest who abused children, and even his statements on this visit—to bishops in one case and priests in another—lamented the scandal while praising all that the U.S. church has done already to combat it.

He also allowed prelates who have been implicated in the cover-ups to take part in public events and liturgies, most notably retired Philadelphia cardinal Justin Rigali and former Minneapolis-St. Paul archbishop John Nienstedt, whose resignation Francis accepted earlier this year.

That the papal apology and vow of further accountability, as well as the promised meeting with victims, did not occur until the last day of the visit threatened to turn the abuse story into a long-running narrative and headlines that would dominate the

final day of what has otherwise been a pathbreaking visit for the Catholic Church.