

Francis admits misjudgment in Chile sex abuse case

The pope said he lacked full information about a bishop, but other Chilean bishops said they told him the truth. He summoned them all for a rare emergency meeting.

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Pope Francis, right, celebrates mass at the Maquehue Air Base in Temuco, Chile, on January 17, 2018. AP Photo/Alessandra Tarantino.

Pope Francis admitted in a public letter in mid-April that he made “grave errors” in judgment in Chile’s sexual abuse scandal and invited the victims he had discredited to Rome to beg their forgiveness in person.

He also summoned all of Chile’s bishops to the Vatican for an emergency meeting to discuss repairing the damage from the scandal, which has badly tarnished his reputation and that of the Chilean church.

The Vatican orders up such emergency visits only on rare occasions, such as when American bishops were summoned in 2002 after the clerical sexual abuse scandal exploded in the U.S. and in 2010 when Irish bishops received a comprehensive dressing down at the Vatican for their botched handling of abuse cases.

“I recognize—and so I want it to be faithfully transmitted—that I have fallen in grave errors of judgment and perception of the situation, especially due to the lack of truthful and balanced information,” Francis wrote.

During [his January visit to Chile](#), Francis strongly defended Bishop Juan Barros despite victims coming forward with accounts that Barros had witnessed them being abused by Fernando Karadima—a priest notorious in Chile—and ignored it. Francis accused the victims of “calumny” for pressing their case against Barros, demanded they present “proof” of their claims, and revealed he had twice rejected Barros’s resignation.

“I am convinced he is innocent,” the pope insisted.

After causing an outcry by his defense of Barros, Francis sent the Vatican’s most respected sexual abuse investigator, Archbishop Charles Scicluna, to Chile and New York to interview Karadima’s victims.

Karadima was a charismatic preacher who was removed from ministry by the Vatican for sexually abusing minors and sentenced in 2011 to a lifetime of penance and prayer. Karadima had long been a darling of the Chilean hierarchy, and his victims have accused church leaders of covering up his crimes to protect the church’s reputation.

While Francis’s mid-April letter did not reveal his ultimate conclusions about Barros, he made it clear that he and the bishops have a lot of work to do to turn the Chilean church around.

Francis said they must “reestablish confidence in the church, confidence that was broken by our errors and sins, and heal the wounds that continue to bleed in Chilean society.”

The Chilean bishops insisted they had been truthful to Francis about the need to get rid of Barros—they had proposed he resign and take a year sabbatical—and victims’ advocates said Francis had only himself to blame, since the accusations against Barros were well known and well founded.

Anne Barrett Doyle of BishopAccountability.org, an online antiabuse resource, noted in a news report that Francis received a personal letter about Barros’s misdeeds from a victim in 2015 but seemingly chose to ignore it.

“If Francis was misinformed or inadequately informed, it was because he chose to be so,” she said.

In his recent letter, Francis thanked the 64 people who testified and had the courage to bare the “wounds of their souls” for the sake of truth. After reading the 2,300-page dossier his envoys prepared, Francis affirmed that the victims “spoke in a stark way, without additives or sweeteners, of many crucified lives,” he wrote. “I confess this caused me pain and shame.”

In a statement, the three main people who have come forward with accounts of abuse by Barros said they appreciated Francis’s request for forgiveness. They said they would continue fighting for reparation and forgiveness “until zero tolerance about abuse and cover-up in the church becomes a reality.” Vatican News reported that the pope held confidential meetings with several Chilean abuse survivors in late April.

Many of Chile’s bishops and members of Francis’s own sexual abuse advisory board had questioned Barros’s suitability to lead a diocese given accounts from Karadima’s victims that Barros stood by and did nothing while Karadima groped them. Francis overrode their concerns and appointed Barros bishop of the southern Chilean diocese of Osorno in 2015, saying the church had investigated the claims against him and found them to be baseless.

Osorno’s lay Catholics and many Osorno priests rejected Barros. They greeted Francis’s letter with graciousness, accepting his request for forgiveness but renewing their demand for Barros’s removal.

The head of the Chilean bishops' conference, Monsignor Santiago Silva, insisted the Chilean church had provided only truthful information to Francis about Barros. But, he added, "obviously we didn't do everything we should have done." —Associated Press

FOLLOWING UP (Updated July 3): Pope Francis accepted the resignation of Chilean bishop Juan Barros and two others in June. All 34 of the country's active bishops had offered to resign after Francis called an emergency meeting at the Vatican the prior month. Also in June, police and prosecutors searched a Chilean bishop's office and the ecclesiastical court headquarters to look for documents and other materials related to the sexual abuse scandal, the Associated Press reported.

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