



**DOVOLJ JE**

ZAVOD  
ZA ZAŠČITO ŽRTEV SPOLNIH ZLORAB  
V CERKVI NA SLOVENSKEM

## **PRESS CONFERENCE IN ROME (Associazione della Stampa Estera)**

13 May 2022

### **Subject:**

The challenge of addressing sexual abuse in the Catholic Church in Slovenia

### **Janez Cerar:**

My name is Janez Cerar, I have been a catholic priest for 25 years and a member of the Congregation of the Mission for 30 years. During these months, I am attending studies at the Institute of Anthropology (Pontifical Gregorian University), programme Safeguarding, protection of minors and vulnerable adults.

I feel a personal responsibility and a duty to speak our critically about the workings of the Church, when I recognise that it is important and therefore necessary.

Today, I am here to talk about the issue of sexual abuse in the Catholic Church in Slovenia. So, allow me to express a few thoughts about this Church – the one I came from, the one I belong to, that I want to respect, and the one I care about – I am talking about the Catholic Church in Slovenia.

In the throes of its rigidity, the Catholic Church in Slovenia has chosen the path of bureaucracy, simplification, hierarchical shift away and maintaining distance from the reality of life. This rigidity is a shift away from living the Gospel. Living the Gospel, which is Jesus Christ himself, requires from us that we think, feel, exercise and protect the dignity of man. The fundamental indicator that the Church is once again living the Gospel will be its transparent attitude towards the abused. They are in fact victims of the Church's system. When the Church opens up to them with true solidarity and credibility: by understanding what they have experienced and also survived, and when

it is ready to fulfil its commitment – this will be an indication not only of the Church's attitude towards the abused, but of its mission towards the entire community.

To illustrate the situation, let me present the following data:

according to the statistics of the Catholic Church, 72% of the population of Slovenia identify themselves as members of the Catholic faith (source: Slovenian Bishops' Conference, <https://katoliska-cerkev.si/letno-porocilo-katoliske-cerkve-v-sloveniji-2020>, retrieved on 7 May 2022); Slovenia has a population of 2.1 million (source: Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia, <https://www.stat.si/StatWeb/Field/Index/17/104>, retrieved on 7 May 2022), which means a high level of familial interconnectedness, acquaintances and interdependence, which has both positive and negative aspects. However, this negative aspect includes the concealment, uncritical embellishment, and a commitment to remain silent.

### **Victim of abuse**

I am a survivor of sexual abuse. I later described the sexual abuse I experienced soon after joining the religious society, i.e. at the beginning of my theological studies (in 1990), in a report to civil authorities and church leaders. In doing so, I learned that the perpetrator abused several victims: two of us were adults at the time of the sexual abuse (aged 21 and 26), while the other three were minors (two aged 15 and one 16). For all five victims, the perpetrator was a superior, even in the case of adult victims. It was not a relationship of equal persons, but a relationship between a superior and a subordinate, which, in terms of living in a society, means dependence on the superior's decisions.

I carried my experiences within me for a long time, looking for ways to find credibility in the people holding power to make decisions in the Church in Slovenia, and to tell them what I had experienced.

In November 2018, I joined a group of laypeople who wanted to achieve true changes in the handling of sexual abuse in the Catholic Church in Slovenia, which resulted in the initiative Enough (*Dovolj je*).

The example of addressing sexual abuse of the aforementioned priest had to be made public, as the leaders of the Congregation of the Mission failed to understand and recognise the gravity of the acts committed and their consequences as reprehensible actions despite the victims' reports. It was also necessary to turn to competent institutions in the Vatican. Because of all these interventions, the perpetrator received a sanction at the end of July 2021, which, for a period of three years, prohibited him from: 1) publicly conducting priestly services; 2) holding elected or appointed office within the religious society; 3) having any contact with minors; and ordered him to: 4) hold Holy Mass for the victims, every month for three years.

The victims were never informed of the content of this sanction. The perpetrator informed his parish community of the imposed sanction. We learned this from a news site report (source: <https://www.domovina.je/iz-rima-ukrep-za-pomembnega-slovenskega-duhovnika/>, retrieved on 8 May 2022). The heads of the religious society, neither in Slovenia nor in Rome, made no statements and did not inform the victims.

I emphasise my own greatest dilemma and question: what does it mean to impose an ecclesiastic sanction on the perpetrator, with the perpetrator himself overseeing its execution, and what is the role of superiors, who, unfortunately, did not display any credibility, and can therefore not be trusted in their decisions?

### **Speaking out publicly is the beginning of a new path**

The sanction imposed on the perpetrator in question, as well as sanctions against other perpetrators in some cases, was achieved because of the perseverance, courage and sincerity of our efforts. Based on the developments, we can see that individual responsible persons finally realised that action is necessary and required.

Just as we had to turn to the highest institutions in the Vatican, this time – because of the need for support that victims of abuse in the Catholic Church in Slovenia must receive – we are turning to the international public. Any steps to address the abuse were taken because of public pressure and media support.

## **From victims to survivors**

Today, I must also speak on behalf of the victims who contacted the Enough institute and who I met when they approached me in person. There are 57 of them. Many of their cases are time-barred under Slovenian law. A well-known fact substantiated by experts is that the vast majority of victims speak out decades after the abuse. It is extremely hard to speak out about the trauma of sexual abuse. Experts in psychology and psychiatry know the reason for this.

There are many victims who suffer long-term consequences, manifested as a variety of illnesses, mental health problems, long-term hospitalisations. Many have difficulty establishing and maintaining good, constructive relationships with loved ones. Because of these consequences, they often take long-term sick leave or retire early. The consequences are also felt by their loved ones, their children. Many of them feel anger and ire against the Church as an institution that is incapable of listening to them and fails to show with its actions that it cares about them.

It is true that specific cases had been resolved, ending with the laicisation of (three) priests in the last year. But we need to completely change the way we address such abuse.

Credibility requires that we first establish the principle of zero tolerance for abuse: with appropriate education of candidates for priestly and religious profession, and prior education of their mentors or responsible persons. To train and educate for transparency and accountability in order to enable preventive measures and the ability to take immediate action in the event of abuse.

Actual cases show that a clergyman committing abuse primarily exerts his influence, his power, and often also abuses spiritually. Among the victims in Slovenia are those who, as young people shaping their identity, fell into the hands of manipulators and perverts. Among the victims are those who have experienced the most brutal acts as children. I am not talking only about abuses committed decades ago – I am also talking about young people here, today.

Why do we need so many words when we are dealing with facts of crimes and exploitation, trampling and destruction of dignity?

## **Justice**

The victims are entitled to having their status recognised. They rightly demand justice. This is not revenge. No one wants or demands revenge, as it would not result in any appeasement. Nor change.

Justice is demanded in the spirit of prevention. When it is acknowledged that there have been concrete crimes committed by clergymen, when victims have the opportunity to speak out, when perpetrators and those who have covered up their acts have been punished, when victims are entitled to compensation – these are actions showing credibility that changes will be made to prevent further abuse. Such actions represent significant steps to protect children and young people. Without such actions, prevention is just empty words.

The way such issues were addressed in Slovenia shows primarily the concern that those responsible keep their positions, that they prefer to blur the facts rather than move forward with changes, as proceedings are demonstrably unreasonably lengthy, with examination and decision-making procedures involving persons without any competencies. Furthermore, victims do not know which documents are considered when taking action against perpetrators.

The gravity of the acts committed is so great because they have happened and are happening within the Church, which as an institution is a model of moral standard based on the incarnate dignity of Jesus Christ.

Victims – survivors of sexual abuse demand justice. I emphasise: We are here. As victims of sexual abuse in the Church, we demand justice!

## **Conclusion and starting point**

I sincerely thank everyone who worked with credibility to achieve the necessary changes. I pay my respects to all those who, in support of me, have been personally openly opposed or discredited.

I express my gratitude and support to those individuals, superiors, bishops who are ready to face the fact of sexual abuse committed by clergymen. They do exist, but are unfortunately rare.

I remain a priest, I believe in Jesus and I love the Church; so I want it to become a safe place for everyone.

I support the immediate formation of an independent commission to address the issue of sexual abuse in the Catholic Church in Slovenia and the intervention of the Holy See.

Dear journalists, I would like to thank you for coming and for your work in uncovering the burden of abuse and the mission of protecting human dignity in the Catholic Church in Slovenia.

I leave you with the words of Pope Francis<sup>1</sup>, said at a press conference on 13 November last year:

*"I also thank you for what you tell us about what goes wrong in the Church, for helping us not to sweep it under the carpet, and for the voice you have given to the victims of abuse: thank you for this."*

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/speeches/2021/november/documents/20211113-onoreficenze-giornalisti.html>;  
retrieved on 7 May 2022