



PRESS RELEASE

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EMBARGO UNTIL PRONOUNCEMENT

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Video message by H.E.R. Sean Cardinal O'Malley
to the General Assembly of the Italian Bishops' Conference

25 May 2022

(Text revised for publication)

Pace e bene!

My brothers, you are in the Upper Room.

In these days before Pentecost, you are indeed like the apostles gathered around Our Lady and Peter praying for the Holy Spirit to be poured out on the Church. St Francis of Assisi wanted the friars to celebrate chapters close to Pentecost so that the Holy Spirit could be the Father General of the order. May the Holy Spirit be poured out on our Church and especially on your Bishops' Conference as you are called to make so many challenging decisions.

These are difficult matters to discuss. It might be even more difficult to arrive at some common action among yourselves on how to handle them comprehensively. But I applaud your efforts like many others. We in the Pontifical Commission are ready to offer whatever help we can.

Even after forty years of ministry as a priest and bishop engaged in some way or other with the issue of child protection and sexual abuse by clergy, I still consider myself learning new things about these matters.

As you can imagine, no young priest or bishop would ever choose to have to spend so much of his ministry dealing with these issues. During my first 20 years as a priest, I worked as a chaplain to the mostly Latino immigrant community in Washington, DC. These 20 years were some of the happiest of my priesthood.

Since that time, I have been called to serve as bishop in four different dioceses in the United States, each one with a progressively worse profile in terms of the history of child sexual abuse by clergy and its mishandling by pastors.

One of the greatest difficulties during that time has been the challenge of sitting down with survivors individually or in groups and listening to the

stories of abuse. As I am sure you know, it can be heart-stopping to hear firsthand the experience of sexual abuse by a member of the clergy. It can be especially difficult when the person is remembering the abuse that might have taken place many years ago. But when they sit there and open their hearts, for them it might seem like it happened only yesterday.

I had the honor of arranging meetings of survivors with Emeritus Pope Benedict XVI as well as with Pope Francis, both of whom have undertaken a mostly hidden ministry of mercy in the way they have constantly reached out to survivors.

Of course, the pain and incomprehensible wickedness revealed in those periods of testimony can quickly give way to expressions of anger by survivors at the Church and her leadership. At times the demands of survivors can be so overwhelming, that it can lead to frustration and further anger by survivors. Sometimes, and perhaps rightly so, it seems there is no adequate steps we can take to make things right for those who have been abused. It is perhaps the most difficult part of being a pastor: knowing that our listening and our efforts at healing and justice will likely fall short of what survivors are looking for. It's a sober reminder that ultimately only God's grace can make whole what sin has broken.

I remember one story when I was bishop in Fall River, in Massachusetts. The diocese decided to organize a listening session with those angry at the way the Church had dealt with accusations of abuse in the past. We had received a lot of angry letters and calls about the history of abuse in the diocese especially in light of some very difficult cases of abuse.

I remember driving to the pastoral center where the meeting was taking place with one of the married deacons from the diocese. During the journey, the deacon knew that I was a little preoccupied about the upcoming meeting because I was silent the whole way. As we arrived we could see that there were many other cars in the parking lot and the hall seemed to be full. As I got out of the car, the deacon said to me: Don't worry, bishop, I will keep the engine running.

And to this day I remember that meeting very well. It was contentious and full of disappointment and anger not only about the sexual abuse perpetrated by some priests, but about the way it had been handled; the way people had been ignored in their suffering and the way the history had been erased. It was one of many meetings that I have taken part in over the years.

I have come to appreciate some fundamental insights because of all this. We have nothing to fear by telling the truth. The truth will set us free. Acknowledging people's stories of abuse, listening to survivors and committing to working together is not easy, but I can tell you after 40 years that it is the only way.

Papa Montini was correct when he said that the Church is an expert in humanity. In this way, we can surely find ways to embrace the human lives that have been broken by the painful reality of abuse in our Church. This work of listening, healing and justice is being asked of us since it belongs to the fundamental ministry of a priest and pastor: to welcome people and to be instruments of God's grace for those who have been hurt by life, even when that hurt comes from within our own ranks. One of the strongest desires of the human heart is to feel safe. Our people want to feel safe in our Church and that means they want to be strengthened in their faith by their pastors.

And here I would like to say two things that might be helpful in your discussions.

The reality is that we will be judged on our response to the abuse crisis in the Church. We need a pastoral conversion that includes the following:

1. An effective pastoral care of victims;
2. Clear guidance (and vigilance) on training courses for staff in the diocese;
3. Adequate and accurate screening;
4. Removal of perpetrators of abuse;
5. Cooperation with civil authorities;
6. Careful assessment of the risks existing for priests guilty of abuse (for themselves and the community) once they have been reduced to the lay state;
7. Public verification of the protocols in place so that people know the policies are working. An audit and report on the implementation of the policies is very useful.

The good news is that where effective policies are adopted and effectively implemented, the number of cases is dramatically reduced.

The biggest obstacle to this pastoral conversion is the tendency among us to immediately defend the Church from those who appear to attack the Church for its mistakes and demand what can seem like unreasonable changes. Of course, defending the Church may seem a natural reaction especially for bishops who have been charged with protecting the flock and the Church to which they belong. Pope Francis has spoken about this tendency often and has spoken about the need to err on the side of welcome and to not become too defensive.

Indeed, our Holy Father has described the Church as a field hospital, tending to those who have been broken and wounded by the world. I would simply add that the scourge of sexual abuse within the Church can be likened to a something that one gets while you are in the hospital. No-one in the hospital –especially the management of the hospital---wants to admit that you got sick in the place where you are supposed to get well. I think this might account for why it is difficult to accept and respond collectively to the reality of historical abuse in our Church.

Another point I'd like to make relates to how credibility can be assured and strengthened in our Church. Recently, Pope Francis asked the Commission to prepare a report on all the efforts being made to keep children and vulnerable persons safe in our Church. There can be no doubt that the Church is one of the principal global trainers of good practices around the protection of minors. In the United States over the last twenty years, I cannot think of a single entity that has trained as many people in good safeguarding practices as the Catholic Church. This story also needs to be highlighted. And this witness to good practice that will be seen in the Commission's annual report to the Holy Father will, according to Pope Francis, help rebuild credibility between clergy and the people. The Pope has said: "Without that progress, the faithful will continue to lose trust in their pastors, and preaching and witnessing to the Gospel will become increasingly difficult." More than a defense of the institution or a legal requirement imposed on the Church, good practice and good reporting help prepares the ground for the Good News.

As you chart the way forward, the history of abuse in our Church will come into the light more and more. This has been a normal process in every country where we have seen this happen. But telling the truth about what happened is not the same as making a judgment on what happened in the past especially about who made mistakes or who was also caught in an imperfect situation. Pope Francis has spoken about the need for an appropriate hermeneutic so that we don't judge the realities of the past with the criteria of today. Sexual abuse has always been wrong, for sure. But how pastors have dealt with these accusations, while inadequate in some cases, should not be seen through the lens of what we know today.

Let us not be afraid of accepting the wrong that has been done to many of our brothers and sisters. But let us also be careful not to rush to judgment on those who dealt with those realities as best they could. Hindsight can be a very cruel judge. Where people failed in their duties, steps to hold them accountable should be made. But in all of this sifting through the past, there should be merciful treatment of everyone involved.

During the life of the Commission, we have seen the reality of abuse of children –especially from the past --- unfold in more and more parts of our Church and our world. No part of our world is exempt from dealing with these issues. Given the depth and the experience of the Church in Italy, I believe you have a unique

opportunity to develop an honest and non-defensive dialogue with all those involved, at the national and local levels, who are willing to undertake a constructive process of review, of reform and of reconciliation.

Lastly, I would like to say a word on something that might be easy to overlook. It is highly likely that there are some among your priests who were abused by members of the clergy, as children or perhaps in their seminary years. Remember that there are services available and that you are not alone. The reality of abuse is always close to all of us, unfortunately. Whether in our families, our communities or, yes even in our Church. Let us ask the Lord to give us special wisdom, to be guided by the Spirit of Pentecost, renewing all things in the Risen Lord.

Thank you all very much for your time and may God bless you

+ Sean Cardinal O'Malley, OFM Cap.