

News

Victims, Accountability on Agenda at Pope's Sex Abuse Summit

According to information released by Vatican, bishops must reach out to victims before they attend

By Nicole Winfield
Associated Press

VATICAN CITY — The Vatican on Tuesday released the first details of Pope Francis' upcoming high-stakes sex abuse prevention summit, making clear that bishops attending the gathering must reach out to victims before they get to Rome and that accountability is very much on the agenda.

Organizers of the Feb. 21-24 summit warned participants in a letter that failure to address the scandal now threatens the very credibility of the Catholic Church around the world.

As a first step, they urged the estimated 130 presidents of national bishops' conferences attending the summit to meet with survivors in their home countries "to learn firsthand the suffering that they have endured."

Francis invited the church leaders to the meeting to develop a comprehensive response to what has become the gravest threat to his papacy, as the abuse and cover-up scandal erupted anew in the U.S., Chile and elsewhere this year.

Survivors have been dubious about what the meeting can accomplish,

given the limited time, the varied experiences and needs of national churches and the fact that the problem has already been known for years.

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“They’re just now getting around to this? Good Lord, where’ve you been?” marveled Barbara Dorris, a survivor of abuse who has been a longtime outspoken advocate for victims.

Noting that the U.S. scandal first emerged in 2001, she said: “It’s been 17 years. If you haven’t met with survivors in 17 years, I think that says a lot right there.”

In revealing the first details of the meeting, the Vatican said it would focus on three main areas: responsibility, accountability and transparency. The reference to accountability suggests that church leaders will confront not only the crimes of priests who

rape and molest minors, but the cover-up by their superiors as well.

Abuse victims and their advocates have long blasted the Vatican for failing to discipline and remove bishops who fail to protect their flocks, and until recently Francis appeared unwilling to significantly change course.

He appointed four key clerics to prepare the meeting: Chicago Cardinal Blase Cupich, a Francis-appointee and staunch supporter, Mumbai Cardinal Oswald Gracias, a member of the pope’s informal cabinet, as well as the Vatican’s leading abuse experts, Maltese Archbishop Charles Scicluna and the Rev. Hans Zollner.

Their letter to the global church hierarchy laid out the stakes.

“Absent a comprehensive and communal response, not only will we fail to bring healing to victim survivors, but the very credibility of the church to carry on the mission of Christ will be in jeopardy throughout the world,” they wrote.

“Each of us needs to own this challenge, coming together in solidarity, humility and penitence to repair the damage done, sharing a common



Pope Francis waves to faithful during the Angelus noon prayer in St. Peter's Square, at the Vatican, Dec. 16. Organizers of an upcoming summit on sexual abuse have warned participants that failure to address the global scandal now threatens the credibility of the Catholic Church.

commitment to transparency and holding everyone in the church accountable,” they said.

Their appeal for bishops to meet with victims was an indication that many in the church hierarchy continue to deny the scope of the problem and have never met with a victim.

Vatican spokesman Greg Burke said that meeting with victims “is a concrete way of putting victims first and acknowledging the horror of what happened.”

Francis announced in September that he was convening the summit, signaling awareness at the top of the church that clergy abuse is a global problem and not restricted to some parts of the world or a few Western countries.

He did so as he worked to recover from his botched handling of the scandal in Chile, sparked earlier this year when he repeatedly discredited victims of a notorious

Chilean predator priest and defended a bishop who had protected him.

Francis eventually admitted he was wrong, apologized to the victims and secured offers of resignation from every accused bishop in the country. Francis took action after The Associated Press challenged him on the case and produced evidence that he had received victims’ complaints.

Francis’ papacy was later jolted by accusations from a retired Vatican ambassador that the pope himself rehabilitated now-disgraced American ex-cardinal Theodore McCarrick, who was accused of molesting and harassing adult seminarians. Francis hasn’t responded to the allegations, though he has ordered a limited investigation into them.

Expectations for the February summit, already high after a year of crisis, took on greater

import last month after the Vatican blocked U.S. bishops from taking action to impose new accountability measures on themselves.

The Vatican never fully explained why it halted the U.S. measures, part of the communications breakdowns that occasionally bedevil the Vatican.

The details of the summit were announced on the same day the Vatican announced a shakeup in its communications operation.

Francis named veteran Vatican correspondent Andrea Tornielli as editorial director coordinating Vatican media.

And he tapped Italian writer and professor Andrea Monda to head the Vatican newspaper, L’Osservatore Romano. Monda replaces Giovanni Maria Vian, a church historian and journalist who has headed the daily since 2007 and now becomes its emeritus editor.

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