

Listen to victims and learn from your mistakes, women plead to USCCB

(CNA) - In the afternoon of the first full day of the US bishops' autumn general assembly, two speakers pleaded with the bishops to listen deeply to abuse victims and to lay experts in the Church about how to move forward.

Christina Lamas, Executive Director of the National Federation for Catholic Youth Ministry, told the bishops they must not ignore the pain of the victims of clergy sex abuse.

Many young people, she said, “have been hurt twice by the Church,” first when they were abused by a cleric, and then again when they were ignored by Church leadership after the abuse.

“We need words of compassion when speaking about those disconnected from the Church, to view them as sisters and brothers, not as prize objects,” Lamas said.

“We need bishops to stop seeing conspiracy and malice, instead we look for our bishops and those who work with them to assume the good” on the part of those who come forward, she added.

While the Vatican has ordered the U.S. bishops conference not to vote on proposals aimed at sex abuse reforms until after a meeting of the world’s bishop conference presidents in February, the subject has still featured prominently at the meeting of U.S. bishops, which is being held in Baltimore Nov. 12-14.

Lamas, who spoke during a Monday afternoon session, also called the bishops to examine and root out the causes of sexual abuse.

“From you our bishops, we need you to address the root of the problem – abuse of power. We need soul-searching about clericalism and its roots,” she said.

There have been “glimmers of hope,” Lamas said, noting that some bishops have opened investigations, created review boards, and held listening sessions in their dioceses.

Young people are also now being taught “not to keep secrets, and that no person is above question or above the law,” she said.

Lamas asked the bishops to “walk with” the laity at this time, “rather than ignore us. You are not spiritual fathers of only the clergy” but of all, she said.

Following a period of prayer and reflection, Sr. Teresa Maya, CCVI of San Antonio and past president of Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR) addressed the bishops, expressing her disappointment at the scandals and urging them to learn from some of the lessons that women religious have learned through their own times of crisis.

“I accepted your courageous invitation (to speak at the conference) because of my deep love for the Church,” she said, although she said she had hoped a snowstorm might have cancelled the whole event.

While she loves the Church, Maya said she has found it “painful” in recent months to recite the words of the Creed: “One, holy, Catholic and apostolic Church.”

Maya said she was tempted to stop saying that part of the Creed “until something concrete happened. Then I realized this was my Church and wondered what was mine to do.”

She said she was recently asked by a friend why Catholics should stay in the Church after all of the scandals, and Maya said after a long silence, she responded: “We stay because of Jesus Christ.”

“How do we return to (Christ) for mercy and reconciliation, for the grit to do what is our to do?” she asked the bishops.

She said she prayed that the bishops would have a “deep capacity” to listen to the survivors of clerical abuse, to hear their anger and their pain.

The bishops are entrusted with the task of being the “physicians and healers” of the Church, but “the best physicians are first good listeners,” she said.

Maya then offered the bishops three ways they could learn from orders of women religious, who have gone through their own trials and crises, and who now face sharply declining numbers and aging populations.

The bishops must face the scandals together, with a listening and contemplative heart, and must be willing to root out anything that goes against discipleship with Christ, she said.

“You are called to renewed spiritual depth,” which will enable the bishops to discern the good spirits from the bad, she said.

She urged the bishops to renewed communion among themselves, and to have the willingness to listen to other bishops who have put policies and procedures in place that have actually worked to help bring healing and reconciliation to survivors of abuse.

“You should not expect the Vatican to resolve what is yours to resolve,” she said. “The Vatican doesn’t have the knowledge, resources and gifts that you do. You can be models for the rest of the world. I urge you to seize this opportunity.”