

## **Pope Francis: On sexual abuse, Church and society have a 'new conscience'**

Pope Francis said that renewed procedures and priorities in handling sex abuse cases have yielded results in the Church, and have developed alongside a greater moral awareness of the dangers of child abuse. Francis spoke during a press conference Sept. 25 on the return flight from a four-day papal visit to the Baltic region.

Citing the Pennsylvania grand jury report released Aug. 14, Francis said the difference between the number of historical and recent abuse cases is clear, and indicates true progress in the way the Church addresses the problem of clerical sexual abuse.

“We see that in the first 70 years there were so many priests that fell into this corruption, then in more recent times it has diminished, because the Church noticed that it needed to fight it in another way,” the pope said. “Watch the [number of cases] and watch when the Church became conscious of this.”

Francis stressed that while meaningful progress should be recognized, there is no such thing as a tolerable level of abuse: “Even if it was just one priest who abused a boy or a girl, this is atrocious, because that man was chosen by God.”

While the pope noted that sexual abuse was not confined to the Church alone, it was in the Church that it was “the most scandalous, because [the Church] should bring children to God and not destroy them.”

Francis also said that in the past, a mentality had existed in the Church and the wider culture which contributed to a pattern of abuse and cover-ups. The pope said that previous approaches to handling sexual abuse allegations were often informed by consciences more concerned with scandal and taboo than with protecting victims.

“In the old times these things were covered up, they even covered them up at home, when the uncle was molesting the niece, when the dad was molesting his sons, they covered it up because it was a very big disgrace... it was the way of thinking in previous times.”

The pope explained that there was now a greater moral awareness of the seriousness of child sexual abuse, but that to understand the mistakes of the past it was necessary to consider the historical and cultural context.

“It is a principle that helps me to interpret history a lot,” he said. “A historic event is interpreted with the hermeneutic of the time period in which it took place, not with a hermeneutic of today.”

Offering the example of the history of different “indigenous people,” the pope noted that to modern eyes there were “so many injustices, so much brutality, but it cannot be interpreted through the hermeneutic of today [now] that we have another conscience.”

Francis also compared the Church’s shifting attitude towards covering up sexual abuse with changed perceptions of the death penalty, noting that the Church went from having its own civil executioner to eventually progress beyond recognizing a need for capital punishment at all.

The pope also stressed that the renewed seriousness with which the Church was prosecuting cases of abuse had yielded results, and he underscored his personal commitment to zero-tolerance, saying that he had never - and would never - extend pardons to convicted abusers.

“I have received so, so many completed convictions from [the Congregation for] the Doctrine of the Faith and I have said [go] forward, forward, never have I signed a request for grace after a conviction. On this I do not negotiate, there is no negotiation.”

Francis has been criticized for his 2014 "pardon" of Fr. Mauro Inzoli, an Italian who had been accused of sexually abusing multiple children in the course of a decade. Inzoli was removed from ministry by Benedict XVI in 2012, and restored by Francis in 2014. Following a 2016 civil conviction for eight counts of sexual abuse of minors, Inzoli was then dismissed from the clerical state by Francis in 2017.

Francis blamed his initial reversal on being new to his office, and not understanding the case fully. Some clerics close to the pope say that Francis was persuaded to restore Inzoli to ministry after pontifical advisers made a personal plea to the pope.

The pope has recently indicated that he has taken an active role in the handling of some high-profile cases. During a previous in-flight press conference he said that he will personally judge some cases, having first received legal advice from officials at the CDF.

Speaking about a meeting with young people he had held earlier that day in Tallin, Estonia, Francis spoke of the damage which had been done to the faith of young people.

“They [young people] are scandalized by incoherence, they are scandalized by corruption, and into this [scandal] of corruption enters that which you were under-lining: sexual abuse.”

Instead, the pope said young people were “asking to be heard,” saying they did not want “fixed formulas” of engagement or versions of “accompaniment where they are ordered what to do.”

Next month the 15th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops will convene in Rome to address the topic of young people, the faith, and vocational discernment.