

In private meeting, victims tell leaders of abuse summit: 'We want action'

VATICAN CITY (CNA) -- About a dozen victims of clergy sexual abuse met Wednesday with the organizing committee of the Vatican sex abuse summit, expressing their desire that the week's meeting yield action on the part of Church leaders.

Evelyn Korkmaz, an abuse victim from Canada and a member of "End Clergy Abuse" (ECA) told journalists after the Feb. 20 meeting, which lasted more than two hours, that she was happy their voices were listened to, but "we don't want more meetings, we we want decisive action."

The Church already knows their story, she stated: "They don't need our story, they need to take action and they need to take action now."

In comments to journalists after the dialogue, victims noted that on Feb. 25, the day after the sex abuse summit is to conclude, a meeting of top Vatican officials will take place to debrief and discuss next steps.

Vatican spokesman Alessandro Gisotti said Feb. 20 the meeting will be an "interdicasterial meeting" of members of the Vatican offices connected to the issue of abuse, though he did not say exactly who would be present. It was noted that the meeting will also include experts on the protection of minors.

Victims said the four members of the summit's organizing committee present at their encounter Wednesday -- Cardinal Blase Cupich of Chicago; Cardinal Oswald Gracias of Bombay; Archbishop Charles Scicluna of Malta, adjunct secretary of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith; and Fr. Hans Zollner, a member of the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors (PCPM) -- will also be present at the follow-up Feb. 25.

Fr. Federico Lombardy, who is acting as moderator during the child protection summit, was also present at Wednesday's meeting with victims.

Mary Dispenza, a national representative for and leader of SNAP in Seattle, Washington, said her hope is that the follow-up meeting of Vatican leaders will be able to give specific points of action: that they "are going to do one, two, three, and four."

While the Vatican had said Pope Francis would not be a part of the meeting between victims and summit organizers, several victims expressed disappointment he did not make a surprise appearance.

According to Phil Saviano, several of the victims made requests to meet the pope, but no promises were made that they would be able to do so.

A board member of "Bishop Accountability" and a partner of the Boston Globe's "Spotlight" team back in 2001, Saviano during the meeting read aloud a letter stressing the importance of transparency.

In the letter, which was made available to the press in advance, he said what is taking place in the Church today is a "tipping point," and that without total transparency, "people's faith and trust in the Vatican is rapidly washing away."

In particular, Saviano's letter, which was addressed specifically to Scicluna, called on the Vatican to release the names and files of any priests who have been reported to the Vatican for child abuse, in order to, he told journalists later, prevent future abuse and out of respect for victims.

"These four men seemed to agree with what I had to say about transparency about releasing the records," he said to journalists. Saviano also said Scicluna approached him privately after the meeting to say he "agrees with me completely on what I was asking him to do."

The caveat, however, was what several victims described as an expression of powerlessness on the part of the cardinals and archbishop present, who said, according to the victims, that they agreed with their suggestions, but that they themselves do not have the power to put these ideas into action.

The encounter with victims took place in the Maria Santissima Bambina Institute, a guest house situated on Vatican property just outside St. Peter's Square.

Other victim survivors present included Italian Francesco Zanardi, the founder of Italy's only network of clerical abuse survivors, Spaniard Miguel Angel Hurtado, leader of the organization Infancia Robada ["Stolen Childhood"], and members of the French association, La Parole Libérée, François Devaux and Olivier Savignac.

Also present was Chilean Juan Carlos Cruz, a victim of the notorious abuser Fr. Karadima. He told journalists he is calling on bishops "to do what they have to do for this [meeting] to be successful."

"The bishops cannot continue getting it wrong because as it is, the Church is on borrowed time."

A woman from Jamaica who is a victim of clerical abuse was also present.

The one non-victim to join the meeting with summit organizers was Pedro Salinas. A Peruvian, he is a former member of the lay Catholic organization Sodalitium Christianae Vitae (SCV) and co-author of the book "Half Monks, Half Soldiers."

Saviano noted that the intended purpose of the meeting on the protection of minors is very clear -- educating bishops -- so he hopes action will take place in the follow-up.

The meeting itself is "for those that understand what's going on, to make sure they're all on the same page. And for those that don't understand, to bring them up to speed and let them know that there's going to be expectations that they'll be expected to live up to," he said.

Dispenza, a former religious sister, emphasized that in her opinion, "this is the moment for the Catholic Church; that it's either going to survive or not. And a lot is going to depend on how Pope Francis handles these days and the actions he takes," adding: "So we'll have to see."

Saviano, who said he's been public with his story of abuse since December 1992, said he thinks there's been progress in the last decades: "I do think [the abuse summit] is a milestone and I hope that I'm not going to be really disappointed six months from now."

"If there was ever a time for transparency, now is it. And maybe, if you do it properly, some of the Catholics who are at this point bailing out of the sinking ship, might reconsider and come

back,” he stated. “But you have to give concrete signs that you're really coming up with a good plan to address this. And it can't be just talk.”