News



Chileans protest Bishop Juan Barros in Osorno, Chile, March 2015, as the newly appointed bishop celebrates his first Mass there. (CNS/Reuters/Carlos Gutierrez)



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Despite repeated accusations by Pope Francis that survivors of clergy sex abuse in Chile are guilty of "slander" and "calumny," Juan Carlos Cruz is still speaking out about the abuse he suffered at the hands of a Chilean priest — and about the cover-up by church leaders there.

During his visit to Chile last week and on the papal plane Jan. 21, Pope Francis defended Bishop Juan Barros Madrid of Osorno, Chile, insisting there is no evidence the prelate ignored or covered up sexual abuse by Fr. Fernando Karadima.

But Cruz told NCR Jan. 23 that he and other survivors testified — in criminal, civil and church proceedings — that while "the bigger abuse was behind closed doors," Barros was in the room when Karadima touched the genitals and put his tongue in the mouth of Cruz and other victims.

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> "I don't know if I should have taken a photograph for more evidence. What other evidence than our testimony, and that of so many others, do they need?"
> —Juan Carlos Cruz

"That's what Barros saw," said Cruz, who now lives in Wilmington, Delaware. "I don't know if I should have taken a photograph for more evidence. What other evidence than our testimony, and that of so many others, do they need?"

He believes it is impossible that Barros and others did not see the abuse. "They were standing by me when things happened," Cruz said. "If they want to say they saw nothing, that is an absolute lie."

Cruz and other victims of Karadima have testified in court and in letters sent to church officials that Barros and other church officials — including bishops Andrés Arteaga, an auxiliary in Santiago, Tomislav Koljatic of Linares, Chile, and Horacio Valenzuela of Talca, Chile — knew of the abuse and covered it up.

The Chilean bishops have consistently denied witnessing any abuse by Karadima or participating in a cover up. Barros and Valenzuela denied the accusations most recently in an interview with Cruxnow.com, in a story published Jan. 17.

Juan Carlos Claret, a spokesperson for Laicos de Osorno, a group of laypeople from Barros' diocese that has vocally opposed him, called Francis' comments "unbelievable words."

Claret told Cooperativa.cl, "Really we can't understand why the pope thinks the problem is the word 'proof' and not the fact that he has treated the victims like liars, like slanderers."

At a press conference aboard the papal plane Jan. 21, Francis apologized for earlier statements when he said he had not seen "proof" that Barros knew of Karadima's abusive behaviors. He made a distinction between "proof," which is a legal principle, and "evidence."

"I should have said 'evidence,' " Francis told journalists. "I know that many abused people cannot bring forward proof. They don't have it. Or maybe sometimes they have it and they are ashamed and they suffer in silence. The drama of those who were abused is tremendous."

"With this, I have to say I apologize, because the word 'proof' hurt," Francis said.

"Here the pope isn't being totally clear," Claret said. "There are proofs. What the pope does is discredit the testimonies which are the only proof of the abuses that exists."



Chilean Father Fernando Karadima leaves the Supreme Court building in Santiago, Chile, Nov. 11. Father Karadima went to the court for questioning in a lawsuit brought against the Catholic Church over sexual abuses he is said to have committed against three victims. The priest has denied accusations of abuse, but in 2011, a Vatican investigation found him guilty of abusing teenage boys over many years and ordered him to retire to "a life of prayer and penitence." (CNS/Carlos Vera, Reuters)

Background

Karadima, now 87, was a charismatic and highly influential cleric in Chile for decades. As pastor of the El Bosque parish in an upscale Santiago neighborhood, he counted bishops and priests among his disciples. That ended in 2011 when the Vatican ordered him to "retire to a life of prayer and penitence" for sexually abusing minors.

Barros, now 61, arrived at the El Bosque parish as a seminarian in 1972. Karadima served as his spiritual director and helped him obtain a post as secretary for

Cardinal Juan Francisco Fresno in 1983. He held this position until 1990. He was ordained a bishop in 1995 serving as an auxiliary in Valparaíso, Chile, and then as bishop of Iquique, Chile, in 2000 and of the military ordinatiate in 2004. Francis made him bishop of Osorno in 2015.

In 2010, Cruz, along with James Hamilton and José Andres Murillo, went public with accusations that Karadima had abused them decades before when they were teenagers. They would learn that allegations of abuse had been leveled against Karadima as far back as the 1980s, but nothing had ever come of them.

Chilean prosecutors opened a case against Karadima in 2010 and at least four other men came forward with similar accusations. The case was eventually dropped because the statute of limitations had expired, but a judge stressed there wasn't a lack of proof.

Related: Chilean cardinals close to pope stained by abuse cover-ups

Growing frustration

Cruz has written to church officials including the papal nuncio in Chile multiple times, before and after Francis was elected pope. Frustrated by what he called a lack of action, in 2015 he made public letters sent to nuncio Archbishop Ivo Scapolo.

Cruz also confirmed to NCR that he repeatedly sought to meet with Francis about his case, with letters to the papal nuncio, through conversations with Cardinal Sean O'Malley of Boston, and in a letter to Francis himself.

When Jorge Mario Bergoglio of Argentina was first elected to the papacy, Cruz was hopeful for justice against the church leaders who covered up or ignored the abuse — including Cardinal Ricardo Ezzati of Santiago and his predecessor, Cardinal Francisco Javier Errázuriz Ossa.

"We [Chile and Argentina] are next door to each other, we speak the same language and have the same culture. And [Francis] knew about the Karadima case because it was so big in the region," Cruz said. "But as the years went by, I saw him to be worse than I had expected."

Letter from Juan Carlos Cruz to Archbishop Ivo Scapolo by National Catholic Reporter on Scribd

Cruz said he doesn't understand why the pope seems to get angry when defending Barros. "I think he is a very stubborn man who doesn't like to be contradicted," he told NCR. "He thinks that Barros is this white dove, with no original sin. It's crazy."

Cruz and two other survivors have launched a civil lawsuit against the church, seeking an apology and damages of $600,000. Their next hearing is set for March.

But what Cruz really wants is the removal of church leaders who covered up abuse. The pope's earlier apology to victims of clergy sex abuse means nothing, Cruz said.

"Now we need action," he said. "In Chile, we need the concrete action to remove bishops who have witnessed abuse."

Claret said his group has been frustrated too in its attempts to engage the pope.

In an interview with Religión Digital, Claret says that Auxiliary Bishop Fernando Ramos of Santiago, who is the secretary general of the bishops' conference in Chile, told his group that he couldn't set up a meeting because the decision belonged to Rome, but when the group reached out to the Vatican, it was told that Ramos, who was the national coordinator of the preparatory commission for Francis' visit to Chile, had the authority to set up a meeting.

Claret also said that his group is still willing to talk to the pope.

Anne Barrett Doyle, co-director of Bishop Accountability, said that the pope's comments demonstrated "contempt for victims and fierce loyalty toward brother bishops."

"I think the mask is off," Doyle said. "I think we are seeing where the pope truly stands on this issue."

In a Jan. 22 press release, SNAP interpreted Francis' comments in a similar way. "Pope Francis has made his true feelings known. He would rather not be bothered with questions about abuse."

> "In Chile, we need the concrete action to remove bishops who have witnessed abuse."
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Doyle characterized Francis' claim that the victims had not contacted him as "disingenuous." Given the high stakes and high profile of the case, "it would have been the most constructive and natural thing in the world, not to mention very savvy public relations, for the pope to reach out and meet with them," Doyle said. "He made no attempt to do so."

If Pope Francis wanted to address abuse in Chile, Doyle said, he could "force the bishops and religious superiors to publish a list of all the credibly accused clerics," and suspend bishops such as Barros, who have been accused of complicity until he has completed a "rigorous investigation that involves questioning the victims."

SNAP also called for increased transparency. "Now it is time for the Vatican to end centuries of secrecy and cover-up and make public all of its secret sex abuse files, turn over all evidence to secular authorities, and name every cleric who has abused children or covered up abuse," the press release said.

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