News



Juan Carlos Cruz smiles following a meeting with Archbishop Charles Scicluna of Malta, Italy, in late February at the Church of the Holy Name of Jesus in New York City. (CNS/Eduardo Munoz, Reuters)



by Brian Roewe

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On a snowy Saturday in April, Juan Carlos Cruz was at his Philadelphia-area home enjoying a quiet morning in bed, watching Netflix and eating Honey Nut Cheerios, when his cellphone rang with a call from the Vatican.

The person on the other end of the line said he was contacting Cruz on behalf of Pope Francis, who wished to apologize in person to him and other abuse survivors. Three months earlier during his visit to Chile, Francis had accused them of "calumny" regarding accusations the survivors had raised against Osorno, Chile, Bishop Juan Barros Madrid of covering up and even witnessing sexual abuse of minors by Fr. Fernando Karadima.

The Barros controversy had dominated Francis' January trip to Chile and followed the pope back to Rome. In the months since, intense worldwide criticism spurred a Vatican investigation into the Chilean abuse crisis, which in turn resulted in the resignations of nearly all of Chile's 34 bishops. So far, the pope has accepted five of them, including Barros'.

It was the investigation, conducted in February by Archbishop Charles Scicluna of Malta, and its subsequent report that led the pope to extend his invitation to Cruz and two other survivors, José Andrés Murillo and James Hamilton. "As a good Catholic man," said Cruz, a communications professional, he normally would jump at such an opportunity. In this case, though, he refrained.

"Unless he gave me a big sign, I was not going to accept an offer," Cruz said he told the caller, a stance Cruz added his fellow advocate-survivors would hold, as well.

Four days later, Francis sent a letter to the Chilean bishops in which he said, "I apologize to all those I have offended" for "serious mistakes in the assessment and my perception of the situation," while at the same time summoning all of the prelates to Rome.

Upon seeing that development, Cruz, Hamilton and Murillo decided they too would head to the Vatican to meet the pope.



Chilean clerical sex abuse survivors Juan Carlos Cruz, James Hamilton and Jose Andres Murillo prepare to speak to the media at the Foreign Press Association building in Rome May 2. (CNS/Paul Haring)

Cruz recounted in detail his "crazy year" on the first night of the annual conference of the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests. The conference, held July 6-8 in downtown Chicago, marked 30 years since SNAP's founding.

Unable to attend in person, Cruz began his roughly 40-minute prerecorded video address by expressing gratitude toward "someone who I hold near and dear to my heart" — SNAP founder Barbara Blaine, who died in September 2017, seven months after she resigned from the organization.

"I have so many adjectives and so many things that I could say about Barbara. Certainly her courage and her intelligence and her wonderfulness, if there could be

such a word, is ever-present in my life," Cruz said.

At one point, he displayed a memorial card he carries with him from Blaine's funeral with a quote from Pope Paul VI, "If you want peace, work for justice." Throughout the talk, Cruz emphasized that his story was not just about him or Chilean abuse survivors but all survivors "so we can all together seek justice and end this horror of abuse and cover-up by the bishops in the church."

He wondered aloud how he has managed the past six months without Blaine's counsel, "because who would have told me in January that Pope Francis would have called me a liar in front of the world?"

During his visit to Chile, Francis repeatedly defended Barros, who abuse survivors accused of not reporting and covering up the serial abuse of Karadima. Cruz has said that Barros, while still a priest, had watched Karadima abuse him. Barros, who Francis moved to Osorno in 2015, denied the allegations. In 2011, the Vatican sentenced Karadima to a life of prayer and penance.

"I just couldn't believe what I was hearing," Cruz said of watching coverage on TV of Francis' remarks.

He said he felt a combination of sadness, anger and surprise upon hearing the pope's words. But being deemed a liar was nothing new, he noted, for many of the roughly 100 people in attendance at the SNAP conference.

The call in April was not the first Cruz received from the Vatican.

Weeks after the pope's "calumny" comments, a monsignor reached out on behalf of Scicluna, a noted expert on the church's abuse crisis, who Francis appointed Jan. 30 to head an investigation into what was happening in Chile. The investigation wanted Cruz to testify. Unwilling to return again to Chile, Cruz suggested he provide testimony via Skype. The monsignor agreed and said he would locate a parish for the virtual meeting: "It has to be in a parish," Cruz said he was told.

Days later, his phone rang with a second call — this one incoming from Malta, Scicluna's home archdiocese — concerning the investigation. Cruz was told the pope didn't want him to testify via video, and instead, Scicluna would fly to meet wherever Cruz wanted. They ultimately settled on Feb. 17 at Church of the Holy Name of Jesus in New York City.

There, Scicluna and Cruz spoke for four hours, an experience Cruz described as "painful" and "where I poured my heart out," feelings he acknowledged also were not foreign to his audience in Chicago. Like them, he had told his story to church officials before but said it was always in bad faith. "But this time it was different," Cruz said.

"I felt heard for the first time. That someone wanted to do something," he said.



Juan Carlos Cruz becomes emotional after speaking to reporters following a meeting with Archbishop Charles Scicluna of Malta, Italy, in late February at the Church of the Holy Name of Jesus in New York City. (CNS/Eduardo Munoz, Reuters)

After the meeting with Scicluna, Cruz contacted other survivors in Chile to describe his experience and encourage them to testify, too. He knew they would be skeptical of the investigation, holding little trust in the Chilean bishops who Cruz called "one of the most corrupt bishops' conferences anywhere." In the end, 64 people spoke with Scicluna's investigation, which produced a 2,300-page report.

"I knew that we were on to something," Cruz said.

After Cruz, Hamilton and Murillo in early April agreed to accept Francis' request to meet and seek their forgiveness, the three were determined not to allow their visit to the Vatican to become a public relations stunt. They drafted a list of conditions they shared with the pope, and "he agreed to every single one of our terms," Cruz said.

In late April, the three traveled to the Vatican, each staying on a different floor at Francis' residence, the Casa Santa Marta guesthouse. Across four days, April 27-30, each man met with the pope for two to three hours apiece before meeting as a group for another two hours.

> "I said, 'Holy Father, we cannot let this go on one more [day]. It's in your hands to do something.' He agreed."
>
> —Juan Carlos Cruz
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In Cruz's case, the encounter began with Francis apologizing. "I felt he was very, very sincere," Cruz said.

In their time with Francis, the three tried to focus less on their individual stories but rather convey the global scope of the clergy sexual abuse "epidemic" that has many survivors seeking justice, Cruz said. "This is a crime, and we spelled it out with all our words."

"I said, 'Holy Father, we cannot let this go on one more [day]. It's in your hands to do something,'" Cruz added. "He agreed."

Specific bishops also came up in the conversations, including Cardinal Francisco Errázuriz Ossa, retired archbishop of Santiago and a member of the pope's nine-member advisory Council of Cardinals.

Speaking to reporters in Rome after the meeting, Cruz said he told the pope that Errázuriz and his successor Cardinal Riccardo Ezzati demonized him, while Hamilton alleged that both prelates had covered up abuse. Errázuriz had previously said it was a mistake not to view accusations against Karadima as credible.

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Cruz called his meeting with Francis "hard," "exhausting" and "a huge weight to carry" as he and the others sought to speak on behalf of all survivors, including those who continue to suffer in silence. Later that month, a second group of Chilean survivors met with the pope.

"It was not fun, but it gave me peace that I could do something for me and for others," he said.

Related: Abuse survivor says pope told him God loves him the way he is

Two weeks after their meeting with Francis, the Chilean bishops had their turn.

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According to Cruz, the bishops did not stay at Santa Marta but a house for clergy outside the Vatican. On the first day Francis met briefly with the bishops, Cruz said, and handed them a 10-page document with instructions to pray over it. After short meetings with the pope on the second day, the bishops on the third day announced their resignations en masse. While they stated at a press conference it was their decision, Cruz insisted that wasn't the case.

"They made it seem that they had resigned in their own way. … No, we know, they were asked to resign," he said.

After the document Francis gave the bishops was leaked to and published by the Chilean T13 television station, Cruz said it was "amazing to see" much of what they said to Francis within it.

He called the mass resignations a "triumph for all survivors," and noted the pace of the actions by Francis from a church that has historically moved slowly. To date, Francis has accepted five of the resignations.

"And I know there's many more to come," Cruz said.

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As he concluded his speech, Cruz said the role of survivors everywhere continues to be holding their bishops accountable, adding that those in power in the church "don't realize that they've opened up the floodgates. Because what's happening in Chile is a model for the world."

"I don't want to feel like the problem is solved, because it is too big and people have suffered too much to even think that it's solved," he said. "But I think it's a new day in many ways, and people now can refer to the Chilean situation as precedent. There's precedent."

"We have a glimmer of hope and we intend to use it."

[Brian Roewe is an NCR staff writer. His email address is **broewe@ncronline.org**. Follow him on Twitter: @BrianRoewe.]

Editor's Note: *A previous version of this story misstated Bishop Juan Barros Madrid was elevated to bishop by Pope Francis. Barros was appointed an auxiliary bishop by Pope John Paul II in 1995. He was moved to the Osorno, Chile, Diocese in 2015 by Francis.*

This story appears in the **Chilean bishops resign** feature series. View the full series.
A version of this story appeared in the **July 27-Aug 9, 2018** print issue under the headline: Inside Chilean abuse survivor's meeting with Pope Francis.