News
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Marie Collins is seen at the World Meeting of Families in Dublin Aug. 24. (CNS photo/John McElroy, courtesy World Meeting of Families)



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One of the eight Irish abuse survivors who met with Pope Francis Aug. 25 says that during the meeting the pontiff told the group he is not planning to implement new procedures to hold bishops who cover-up clergy abuse to account, citing measures the Catholic Church already has in place to do so.

"In answer to [my] question of setting up a tribunal and what sort of concrete measures there's going to be, it would appear that there's not going to be anything more," Marie Collins, a former member of the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors, told NCR.

"The pope said there are already tribunals being held and bishops are being held accountable before them," she said.

Collins, who resigned from the papal commission in 2017 in frustration, said she then asked Francis during the meeting why the church is continuing its practice of letting disgraced prelates resign instead of be fired.

"I said, 'If they are being held and bishops are being sanctioned ... then you should be telling us about it, you should be making it known," she recalled. "'Not that they can just walk away and resign, as if it was by choice.'"

"He said that was a good point, and he would do something about it," Collins described Francis' response.

The Vatican said Collins and the seven other survivors met Francis for about 90 minutes in the early evening Aug. 25. Two other survivors present in the meeting released a statement immediately afterward saying that the pontiff had "condemned corruption and cover up within the church as 'caca,'" using a Spanish term for human excrement.

Collins was referring in her comments to a possible renewal of a 2015 proposal from the pontifical commission, approved by Francis, that the Vatican set up a special tribunal to judge bishops who do not appropriately handle accusations of clergy sexual abuse.

That tribunal never came to fruition. In 2016, the pope decided instead to give four Vatican offices power to initiate removal of bishops found negligent in responding to abuse cases.

Describing Francis' response to her inquiry, Collins said: "It would seem that he is confirming that he's not doing anything different than he's doing at the moment."

"If as he says church leaders are being held accountable behind the scenes, and then being allowed to resign when in fact there is some sort of finding about them, then that should be made public," she said. "And he agreed with that point and said that would be something that he would be doing something about it."

"The fact that there's nothing new being planned or brought in, to me, is disappointing," said Collins. "But, if he's going to follow through and actually be more transparent about what's happening with bishops and if they are being held accountable in some way and that's going to be made more public ... I suppose that's a step forward."

Collins, who said there was no agreement made between the survivors and the pope about not discussing their meeting afterwards, said the encounter included a "good cross-section" of Irish survivors of clerical, religious and institutional abuse.

"It certainly wasn't a token thing," she said. "There were people there who had important things to say and he did listen, and he is going to take some actions. Some of the things that we asked him to do, he is going to do."

"I think it was a positive that he met the people he met, and that he met people that did challenge him and did put very specific points to him and very specific demands to him," Collins continued. "Some he was able to respond to and will take action on."

"One thing that was clear is that he accepts the scale of what he referred to as the corruption of those that cover up," she said.

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