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Julie Asher

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Signers of an open letter from Catholic women to Pope Francis urging "truth" and "transparency" on the growing sex abuse crisis expressed hope the pontiff's Sept. 13 meeting with U.S. church officials on the scandal will result in steps needed to move the church toward healing.

U.S. Cardinal Daniel DiNardo "described Pope Francis as 'listening deeply from the heart.' That's a good start but is not enough," Mary Rice Hasson, director of the Catholic Women's Forum, told Catholic News Service Sept. 14. "Catholic women are looking to the pope for specific answers and for concrete steps toward a full investigation and needed reforms. We continue to pray and to hope for further developments."

The letter, a "personal initiative of the individual Catholic women" who have signed it, had 45,343 signatures as of late afternoon Sept. 14.

In an earlier interview with CNS, Hasson said she wrote the letter "to reflect my personal response to the Holy Father's words" that he seeks "a more incisive female presence in the church." It is hosted on the forum's website,

catholicwomensforum.org, but is not sponsored by the forum or any other group or organization.

At the Vatican, Francis met with DiNardo of Galveston-Houston, who is president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. They were joined by: Cardinal Sean O'Malley of Boston, president of the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors; Archbishop Jose Gomez of Los Angeles, USCCB vice president; and Msgr. Brian Bransfield, USCCB general secretary.

After the noon meeting, DiNardo told CNS in Rome that he was "filled with hope, but I also realize all these things might take purpose and time." He did not want to discuss specifics of the private meeting but described the encounter as "very, very fruitful."

The women's letter followed the release of allegations by Archbishop Carlo Maria Vigano that Pope Benedict XVI had imposed sanctions on Archbishop Theodore McCarrick over allegations of sexual misconduct and that those sanctions had been ignored by Francis.

McCarrick, former cardinal-archbishop of Washington, faces credible allegations of child sexual abuse dating back almost 50 years. He also has been accused of sexual misconduct with seminarians. On July 28, Francis accepted the prelate's resignation from College of Cardinals and ordered him to a "life of prayer and penance" until the accusations against him are examined in a canonical trial.

Many have been asking how McCarrick could have risen up the ranks of the church as an auxiliary bishop, bishop, archbishop and finally cardinal.

DiNardo also has said the questions raised about the archbishop "deserve answers that are conclusive and based on evidence." "We agree," says the women's letter.

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The women ask for direct answers from Francis on what he knew and when about sanctions on McCarrick for his "egregious behavior" and how "this predator" was promoted "as a global spokesman and spiritual leader."

"You have said that you seek 'a more incisive female presence in the church,' and that 'women are capable of seeing things with a different angle from [men], with a different eye. Women are able to pose questions that we men are not able to understand,'" the women's letter opens. "We write to you, Holy Father, to pose questions that need answers."

As "faithful daughters of the church," the signers "need the truth so we can help rebuild" and urged the pope not to keep them "at arm's length on these questions."

The signers are wives, mothers, single women, consecrated women, religious sisters and "the mothers and sisters of your priests, seminarians, future priests and religious."

"We are the church's lay leaders, and the mothers of the next generation," the letter says. "We are professors in your seminaries, and leaders in Catholic chanceries and institutions. We are theologians, evangelists, missionaries and founders of Catholic apostolates."

It adds, "We are the hands, the feet, and the heart of the church. In short, we are the church, every bit as much as the cardinals and bishops around you."