News



Bishops walk on the grounds of Mundelein Seminary Jan. 2 at the University of St. Mary of the Lake in Illinois, near Chicago. The U.S. bishops began their Jan. 2-8 retreat at the seminary. (CNS/Bob Roller)



by Heidi Schlumpf

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In a strongly worded, eight-page letter to U.S. bishops, Pope Francis has rebuked the prelates not only for covering up sexual abuse but for unhealthy conflicts and divisions among themselves, which have "gravely" and "seriously" undercut the church's credibility.

"God's faithful people and the Church's mission continue to suffer greatly as a result of abuses of power and conscience and sexual abuse, and the poor way that they were handled, as well as the pain of seeing an episcopate lacking in unity and concentrated more on pointing fingers than on seeking paths of reconciliation," the pope wrote.

"Clearly, a living fabric has come undone, and we, like weavers, are called to repair it," Francis wrote to the bishops, who are gathered Jan. 2-8 for a weeklong retreat, which the pope had requested as part of the bishops' response to renewed attention on clergy sexual abuse.

That repair will require humility and service to restore trust, not self-centeredness, competition or "concern with marketing or strategizing to reclaim lost prestige or to seek accolades," the pope wrote.

Since last summer's revelations about alleged misconduct by then-Cardinal Theodore McCarrick and the subsequent Pennsylvania grand jury report, which detailed decades of alleged abuse by hundreds of priests, the country's bishops have failed to respond as a unified body, and debate in the church has degenerated into typical "culture war" fights.

The pope, citing the words of Jesus to his bickering disciples, makes clear that he believes "it cannot be like that with you," instead calling for a "collegial spiritual fatherhood that does not offer banal responses or act defensively."

"This approach demands of us the decision to abandon a *modus operandi* of disparaging, discrediting, playing the victim or the scold in our relationships, and instead to make room for the gentle breeze that the Gospel alone can offer," Francis wrote.

"Let us try to break the vicious circle of recrimination, undercutting and discrediting, by avoiding gossip and slander in the pursuit of a path of prayerful and contrite acceptance of our limitations and sins, and the promotion of dialogue, discussion and discernment."

The pope quoted recently canonized St. Paul VI: "If we want to be pastors, fathers and teachers, we must also act as brothers."

"Amid the upset and confusion experienced by our communities, our primary duty is to foster a shared spirit of discernment, rather than to seek the relative calm resulting from compromise or from a democratic vote where some emerge as 'winners' and others not," Francis wrote, adding emphatically: "No!"

"It is about finding a collegial and paternal way of embracing the present situation, one that, most importantly, can protect those in our care from losing hope and feeling spiritually abandoned," he said.

The letter was shared Jan. 2 with the estimated 280 bishops attending the retreat at Mundelein Seminary outside Chicago and was released publicly Jan. 3. It reflects a similar papal missive to the bishops of Chile in May 2018, but pays more attention to infighting among the U.S. bishops, saying it "can threaten our fraternal communion."

"Our catholicity is at stake also in our ability as pastors to learn how to listen to one another, to give and receive help from one another [and] to work together," he wrote.

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The pope notes that the sins and crimes of sexual abuse and cover-up have "deeply affected the communion of bishops, and generated not the sort of healthy and necessary disagreements and tensions found in any living body, but rather division and dispersion."

Francis cites an inability, "as a community, to forge bonds and create spaces that are healthy, mature and respectful of the integrity and privacy of each person" and "to bring people together and to get them enthused and confident about a broad, shared project that is at once unassuming, solid, sober and transparent."

Just as the Gospels are not afraid to mention the "tensions, conflicts and disputes" among Jesus' disciples, the pope urged the bishops to prayerfully discern whether their actions are truly helpful and "have the 'flavour' of the Gospel," or not.

"To put it colloquially, we have to be careful that 'the cure does not become worse than the disease,' " he wrote.

Instead, the pope calls for a "new ecclesial season" marked by spiritual conversion of "our way of praying, our handling of power and money, our exercise of authority and our way of relating to one another and to the world around us."

Organizational changes are "necessary but insufficient," he said.

Lost credibility "cannot be regained by issuing stern decrees or by simply creating new committees or improving flow charts, as if we were in charge of a department of human resources. That kind of vision ends up reducing the mission of the bishop and that of the Church to a mere administrative or organizational function in the 'evangelization business,' " Francis wrote.

Instead, he urges the bishops to enter into "affective communion with our people." That, he said, will "liberate us from the quest of false, facile and futile forms of triumphalism that would defend spaces rather than initiate processes" and "keep us from turning to reassuring certainties that keep us from approaching and appreciating the extent and implications of what has happened."

Such conversion on the part of the bishops will also "aid in the search for suitable measures free of false premises or rigid formulations no longer capable of speaking to or stirring the hearts of men and women in our time."

Francis said reconciliation will come only "if we can stop projecting onto others our own confusion and discontent, which are obstacles to unity, and dare to come together, on our knees, before the Lord and let ourselves be challenged by his wounds."

[Heidi Schlumpf is NCR national correspondent. Her email address is hschlumpf@ncronline.org. Follow her on Twitter @HeidiSchlumpf.]

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