News



Pilgrims wave U.S. flags in Panama City Jan. 23, 2019, at FIAT, the largest English-language World Youth Day event. Musical performances and testimonials were mixed with frank discussion about the clergy sexual abuse scandal. (CNS photo/Chaz Muth)



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As Pope Francis was arriving in Panama Jan. 23, bishops from the United States wasted no time addressing the sex abuse scandal back home during a popular event aimed at American and other English-speaking World Youth Day pilgrims.

"It's not easy being Christian, it's not easy being Catholic ... especially today when things in the church are difficult," said Bishop Edward J. Burns of Dallas, addressing the sex abuse scandal in a room of hundreds of U.S. young adults attending the FIAT Festival for U.S. pilgrims at Panama's Figali Convention Center. The event was sponsored by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, the Knights of Columbus and FOCUS.

"How often do we hear our friends say to us: I'm done, I'm bowing out. I will have no more of this, " Bishop Burns said. "My friends, I want you to tell your friends that you'd never separate yourself from Jesus because of Judas. You'd never do that!"

Many in the room applauded.

"Yes, you look at the church today," he continued, "and there have been some who have betrayed us, some even in church leadership."

But he told the pilgrims to "stay strong, stayed focused, stay steady."

The message was well received by those in the room, including Kennedy Horter, 16, of Indiana.

"I don't let people come between me and God," said Horter, wrapped in a U.S. flag.

She said she was not going to judge priests and other good people in the church by the actions of men who likely were never priests "spiritually."

Like other pilgrims, she did not seem to be bothered by the open conversation, which was mixed in with accounts by other young people who spoke of overcoming difficulties, of lives of prayer, and challenges in life. But the situation in the U.S. church seemed to weigh on the minds of many, and the bishops stressed that, in this situation and in other moments of difficulty, Christ must be the anchor.

Bishop Frank Caggiano of Bridgeport, Connecticut, also addressed the scandal while speaking to the pilgrims; he spoke to them about choices. He said there's one choice in life, most important above all others.



Bishop Edward J. Burns of Dallas speaks to World Youth Day pilgrims in Panama City Jan. 23, 2019, at FIAT, the largest English-language World Youth Day event. Musical performances and testimonials were mixed with frank discussion about the clergy sexual abuse scandal. (CNS photo/Chaz Muth)

"There can be only one person who sits at the center of your life -- and mine," he said. "That person is Jesus, and anyone and anything that takes his place is not a choice worth making today. I ask you, don't be afraid to choose Jesus. Don't be afraid to choose light!"

Sister Lucia Richardson of the Sisters of St. Francis of Perpetual Adoration said she was glad the bishops had addressed the "elephant in the room" and discussed "this ugly reality," one that she hears concerns about from young Catholics who speak with her.

Bishop Caggiano said he was deeply sorry for the times the church has "failed you, and anyone in the church has failed you. I am deeply sorry," he said.

"I ask you in this time of shadows and darkness to join with me and all others who wish to move forward and allow our church to be healed and transformed and purified," he said.

But members of the church are facing choices, he said.

"It seems to me, in the time in which we live in the church, it is a time of spiritual twilight," he said. "For there are shadows, there are sins in our midst."

The sin and crime and abuse of young people has deeply destroyed many lives and broken trust with the leadership of the church, he said.

Brian Florin, 24, a seminarian at Mount St. Mary's Seminary in Emmitsburg, Maryland, told Catholic News Service it was important to be open and to talk about the scandal, even at World Youth Day, because it's a point of pain for those in the church in the U.S.

Bishop Caggiano said this is the time when many are considering choices, and he continually referred to the image of dark and light during the day.

"What do we want? The dawn or the dusk? Do we want the dawn where you and I seek holiness of life lived in ordinary ways and bring the light of Christ to whomever we meet? Or will we sit back and say 'the darkness is here and I surrender to it,'" he said. "What is it that you or I will choose? I can say to you, as my family in Christ, I stand before you, with every ounce of energy and grace God has given me, and say that I will choose the dawn and I ask you, are you ready to choose the dawn?"

Bishop Burns reminded pilgrims that the church had lived with scandal from the beginning, including the betrayal of Jesus, but reminded them of Peter and Jesus.

"We're going to survive this. Our Lord promised 'on this rock I will build my church.' Step up and continue to have the strength," he said to great applause.

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