News



Pope Francis has lunch with a group of World Youth Day pilgrims at the San Jose seminary in Panama City Jan. 26. At right is Archbishop Jose Domingo Ulloa Mendieta of Panama. (CNS/Vatican Media)



by Joshua J. McElwee

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A young woman raised the issue of clergy sexual abuse during a private lunch with Pope Francis Jan. 26, making the first direct reference to the Catholic Church's ongoing crisis during the pontiff's five-day visit abroad for World Youth Day.

Recounting her experience at table with the pope and nine other young people from various countries, Mexican-American Brenda Noriega said the church in the U.S. is "going through a crisis right now that we cannot avoid to talk about."

Noriega, who spoke at a briefing shortly after the meal, said that in response to her inquiry Francis "reminded us that it is important to accompany the victims."

"For me, as representative of the U.S. ... it means a lot, to keep in mind that all the victims of the sexual crisis are hurt, and that the church is committed to supporting them," said the Mexican immigrant, who serves as a youth minister in the diocese of San Bernardino, California.

Francis shared a private lunch with five young men and five young women at Panama City's St. Joseph seminary, in what the Vatican called a "particularly festive and familiar environment."

Although the pope has made two apparent indirect references to clergy abuse so far during his Jan. 23-27 visit to Panama, he has not spoken directly about the issue in public.

At a Mass with priests and religious earlier Jan. 26 at the Cathedral Basilica of Santa Maria La Antigua, Francis appeared to imply that the global church had been weakened by revelations of abuse, saying that a "subtle weariness" had come into the faith from "seeing a church wounded by her sin."

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Noriega said that during their discussion, the pontiff referred to abuse as a "horrible crime." She said the pope also referenced the weeklong retreat U.S. bishops recently held at his suggestion, saying he expressed the importance of prayer.

"For me as a youth minister, that means a lot," said Noriega. "We've been angry, but sometimes we forget about prayer because we react too fast."

Vatican spokesman Alessandro Gisotti said the pope considered the opportunity to have lunch with some of the tens of thousands of global pilgrims at World Youth Day particularly important, as, like in a family, sitting at table over a meal "is the moment we can face the real challenges of life."

Among others at lunch with Francis was Bedwin Taitus, a young man from India, who said he wanted to ask the pope a more light-hearted question: how many hours he sleeps each night. About six, the pope said.

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