News
Vatican



Alessandro Gisotti, interim director of the Vatican press office, looks on as Pope Francis speaks to journalists Jan. 23, 2019, aboard his flight from Rome to Panama for World Youth Day. (CNS photo/Vatican Media)



by Joshua J. McElwee

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ABOARD THE PAPAL FLIGHT FROM PANAMA — January 28, 2019

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Pope Francis sought Jan. 27 to downplay expectations for his anticipated February summit on clergy sexual abuse, saying he hopes the encounter helps Catholic bishops "take consciousness" of the issue, but problems of abuse will continue in the church as in other institutions.

In a press conference aboard the papal flight back to Rome after a five-day visit to Panama, the pontiff said he thought expectations for his Feb. 21-24 meeting of global bishop presidents had become "inflated."

"The expectations need to be deflated," said Francis, adding: "The problems of abuse will continue. It is a human problem, everywhere."

Francis spoke about the upcoming abuse summit in a 47-minute press conference in which he also expressed openness to allowing older married men to be ordained to the priesthood where there is a "pastoral necessity."

On the February summit, the pontiff was asked what hopes he had that the encounter would help to restore lay people's trust in bishops following recent revelations that some prelates had covered up abuse or conducted themselves inappropriately with minors.

The pope said the summit, first announced in September, had been proposed by his advisory Council of Cardinals.

"We noted that some bishops did not understand well, or did not know what to do [about abuse]," said Francis. "We felt the need to give a 'catechesis' on this problem to the bishops' conferences."

The pope said the summit has two primary objectives: to "take consciousness" of the seriousness of abuse, and to outline procedures bishops should be following to protect children.

"Sometimes, the bishop does not know what to do," Francis said of the second objective, describing the goal as describing "what the bishop must do, what the archbishop who is a metropolitan must do, what the president of the bishops' conference must do — that it may be clear."

"That the protocols may be clear," he reiterated. "This is the principle."

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Francis had been in Panama Jan. 23-27 for World Youth Day. Among other issues during the press conference, the pontiff was asked about how one of the events at the triennial celebration broached the topic of abortion.

During a Jan. 25 Via Crucis procession, one of the reflections related abortion to Jesus being laid in his crypt after his crucifixion, and referred to the "tomb that opens in the womb of mothers" who choose to abort.

On the flight, the pope was asked how such language corresponded with his papacy's focus on God's mercy.

"The message of mercy is for everyone; also for the human person that is gestating," said Francis.

"After having made this fall, there is mercy, surely," said the pope. "A difficult mercy; because the issue is not about giving forgiveness. The issue is about accompanying a woman who has come to terms of having aborted."

"A woman, when she thinks about what she has done — I will tell you the truth: she needs to be in the confessional," he said.

Francis recalled advice he said he had given to women who spoke to him about their abortions: "Your child is in Heaven. Speak with them. Sing the lullaby you could not sing. There you will find a way of reconciliation between the child and mother."

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