News
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Nigerian Sr. Veronica Openibo, congregational leader of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus, attends the third day of the meeting on the protection of minors in the church Feb. 23 at the Vatican. (CNS/Paul Haring)

by Catholic News Service

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Here is the prepared text of the presentation given Feb. 23 by Nigerian Sr. Veronica Openibo, leader of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus, at the Vatican summit on child protection. Openibo, a member of the executive board of the women's International Union of Superiors General, was one of 10 women religious participating in the summit.

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Abstract

As a result of the self-understanding of her mission in the world today, the church needs to update and create new systems and practices that will promote action without fear of making mistakes. Clerical sex abuse is a crisis that has reduced the credibility of the church when transparency should be the hallmark of mission as followers of Jesus Christ. The fact that many accuse the Catholic Church today of negligence is disturbing. The church must do everything possible to protect its young and vulnerable members. The focus should not to be on fear or disgrace but rather on the church's mission to serve with integrity and justice.

Introduction

The mission of the church flows directly from our deepest understanding of the Incarnation. Catholic Christianity is grounded in belief in a God who chose to be one with the human world.

The self-understanding of the mission of the church must be a manifestation of the Christ we know as both human and divine. The whole of Christ's mission was to reveal who God is and who we can become. This implies a total acceptance of all that is human and all that the power of God's grace does to transform us into being witnesses of the divine. Our worldview, if Christian, must be based on respect and dignity for each human being.

At the present time, we are in a state of crisis and shame. We have seriously clouded the grace of the Christ-mission. Is it possible for us to move from fear of scandal to truth? How do we remove the masks that hide our sinful neglect? What policies, programs and procedures will bring us to a new, revitalized starting point characterized by a transparency that lights up the world with God's hope for us in building the Reign of God?

Throughout the time of writing this presentation, my eyes were cloudy and I wondered what this could mean. Then I remembered the first time I watched the movie "Spotlight," the 2015 American biographical drama about the investigation by the Boston Globe into cases of widespread and systemic child sex abuse in the Boston area by numerous priests and the alleged cover-up by ecclesial authorities.

At the end of the film was a long list of cases and the dioceses where they occurred and reading about the number of children affected (and later seeing the vast amount of money spent on settlements), tears of sorrow flowed. How could the clerical church have kept silent, covering these atrocities? The silence, the carrying of the secrets in the hearts of the perpetrators, the length of the abuses and the constant transfers of perpetrators are unimaginable. Presumably there were significant signs in the confessional and in spiritual direction. With a heavy and sad heart, I think of all the atrocities we have committed as members of the church. The constitutions of my own congregation reminds me: "In Christ we unite ourselves to the whole of humanity, especially to the poor and suffering. We accept our share of responsibility for the sin of the world and so live that his love may prevail" (SHCJ Constitutions n.6). We must acknowledge that our mediocrity, hypocrisy and complacency have brought us to this disgraceful and scandalous place we find ourselves as a church. We pause to pray, Lord have mercy on us!

In "Gaudete et Exsultate" (164) we read that "those who think they commit no grievous sins against God's law can fall into a state of dull lethargy. Since they see nothing serious to reproach themselves with, they fail to realize that their spiritual life has gradually turned lukewarm. They end up weakened and corrupted." So many aspects of this statement from Pope Francis stand out for me on the issue of child abuse, as also these sentences from the PCB Preparation Document: "A church that is closed/shut off is no longer church. Her mission would be thwarted. It's not about giving up principles and secularizing the church, it's about living visibly and perceptibly what you claim to be, or what and how you really are."

We proclaim the Ten Commandments and "parade ourselves" as being the custodians of moral standards/values and good behavior in society. Hypocrites at times? Yes! Why did we keep silent for so long? How can we turn this around for a time to evangelize, catechize and educate all the members of the church, including clergy and religious? Is it true that most bishops did nothing about the sexual abuse of children? Some did and some did not out of fear or cover-up.

We might say the church is now taking steps to arrest the situation but also to be more transparent about all the steps it had been taking privately over two decades, such as meeting with victims of sexual abuse, reporting cases to the appropriate civil authorities and setting up commissions. The question today is more about how to address the issue of the sexual abuse of minors more directly, transparently and courageously as a church. The hierarchical structure and systems in the church should be a blessing for us to reach the whole world with very clear mechanisms to address this and many other issues. Why has this not happened enough? Why have other issues around sexuality not been addressed sufficiently, e.g. misuse of power, money, clericalism, gender discrimination, the role of women and the laity in general? Is it that the hierarchical structures and long protocols that negatively affected swift actions focused more on media reactions?

Reflection

I would like to offer some reflections based on my experience as an African woman religious. I have lived in Rome for 15 years and studied in America for three. So, I am familiar with these issues in the Global North. Probably like many of you, I have heard some Africans and Asians say, that "this is not our issue in countries in Africa and Asia; it is the problem in Europe, the Americas, Canada and Australia.". However, I worked throughout Nigeria in the area of sexuality education for nine years and heard the stories and counselled many people. I realized how serious the issues were and still are and sharing a few of my personal experiences emphasize this fact. In the early '90s a priest told me there were sexual abuses in the convents and formation houses and that, as president of the Nigeria Conference of Women Religious, I should, please, do something to address the issue. A second priest in the early 2000s said that a particular ethnic group practiced a lot of incest but I added that from my personal experience incest is a world issue. A dying old man revealed to me he was acting strangely because of the sexual abuse he experienced as a

teenager from the priests in his school. A 13-year-old girl met her priest attacker 25 years later and he did not recognize her.

Transparency

Let us not hide such events anymore because of the fear of making mistakes. Too often we want to keep silent until the storm has passed! This storm will not pass by. Our credibility is at stake. Jesus told us, "Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe (in me) to sin, it would be better for him if a great millstone were put around his neck and he were thrown into the sea" (Mark 9:42). We must face this issue and seek healing for the victims of abuse. The normal process for clergy — in the past and still in the present in some areas — was/is to give support to "one of us," to avoid exposing a scandal and bringing discredit to the church. All offenders, regardless of their clerical status, found guilty should be given the same penalty for the abuse of minors.

Let us have courageous conversations rather than saying nothing to avoid making a mistake. We can make a mistake but we are not created to be a mistake and posterity will judge us for not taking action. The first step toward true transparency is to admit wrongdoing and then to publish what has been done since the time of Pope John Paul II to heal the situation. It may not be sufficient in the eyes of many, but it will show that the church had not been totally silent.

We must build more effective and efficient processes, based on research in human development as well as civil and canon law, for the safeguarding of minors. Then clear and comprehensive safeguarding policies and guidelines in every diocese should be placed visibly in various parish offices and published on the internet. There must be better handling of the cases through face-to-face, transparent and courageous conversations with both victims and offenders, as well as investigating groups. In some parts of the world, including countries in Africa and Asia, not saying anything is a terrible mistake as we have seen in many countries. The fact that there are huge issues of poverty, illness, war and violence in some countries in the Global South does not mean that the area of sexual abuse should be downplayed or ignored. The church has to be pro-active in facing it.

The excuse that respect be given to some priests by virtue of their advanced years and hierarchical position is unacceptable. This argument states that many of the

criminal offenders are old, some no longer alive, and that we should not hurt them or their reputations by taking away their priesthood in old age. We can feel sad for those who, when they were younger committed offenses that are now being brought out to the open. But my heart bleeds for many of the victims who have lived with the misplaced shame and guilt of repeated violations for years. In some of these cases the offenders did not even see these victims as persons but as objects.

It is true, as a church, that we believe in repentance of the sinner, in conversion of hearts and the grace of transformation, "Go and from now on do not sin any more," says Jesus (John 8:1-11). This can create a strong dilemma for some, especially when we know that abusers have often been victims themselves. Do we need to probe deeply what we mean by justice with compassion? How can we help create the environment for prayer and discernment for the grace of God to enlighten us in the way of justice so that transformation and healing may take place for both victims and offenders? We would need to find out where throughout the world (not only in wealthier countries), are the best practices for doing this being developed and can we implement them? Many of these are to be found within the church.

In publishing the names of offenders, can we publish a complete set of information regarding these situations?

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Strategic way forward

It is becoming evident that for many victims being listened to and helped psychologically and spiritually it was the beginning of a healing process. Can we train enough sensitive and compassionate people to offer this service in all countries including those places struggling to put food on the table? Are there ways of helping parishes heal victims using their traditional wisdom? Do we make use of preaching and other means to address sexual issues in society? How might dioceses share in a strategic way in providing culturally-sensitive education programs and training kits? Such materials, respecting the dignity of the human persons and emphasizing unacceptable behaviors, could be used in parishes and schools, hospitals and other places of pastoral ministry.

How can we continue to address in very concrete ways the issues of prostitution and trafficking on an immense scale as well as personal infidelity and promiscuity around the world? There must be Catholics, alongside others with similar principles, in positions of influence in, for example, the film industry, TV and advertising. They could be encouraged to come together and reflect on their role in promoting a better view of the human person. Let there be a focus on society's disservice to men in every patriarchal culture in the area of sexuality. Let us investigate how better to use social media to educate people on the whole area of sexuality and human relationships.

Essential, surely, is a clear and balanced education and training about sexuality and boundaries in the seminaries and formation houses; in the ongoing formation of priests, religious men and women and bishops. It worries me when I see in Rome, and elsewhere, the youngest seminarians being treated as though they are more special than everyone else, thus encouraging them to assume, from the beginning of their training, exalted ideas about their status. The study of human development must give rise to a serious question about the existence of minor seminaries. The formation of young women religious, too, can often lead to a false sense of superiority over their lay sisters and brothers, that their calling is a 'higher' one. What damage has that thinking done to the mission of the church? Have we forgotten the reminder by Vatican II in "Gaudium et Spes" of the universal call to holiness? In addition, we need to ask responsible and sensitive lay people and women religious to give true and honest evaluation of candidates for episcopal appointments.

Could each diocese be challenged to gather men and women of integrity: laity, including religious, and clergy, to form a joint commission sharing expertise about the documentary procedures and protocols, the legal and financial implications of allegations and the necessary channels of responsibility and accountability? A well-qualified person — lay, religious or priests — is likely to be the best chairperson of such a group. In addition, they need to work out how best to face the serious issues of sexual abuse already exploding in some Asian and African countries in the same way that it has elsewhere. Many people who were sexually abused by priests or others in pastoral positions will suffer as traumatic memories are evoked. Some people will be reminded that they could well be revealed as former or current abusers or accused of covering up such facts. Many in various forms of ministry will come across people, family members, adults and/or children, who have been or are

being abused and need to know how to respond appropriately. Some allegations will be false which causes suffering of another kind. The impact of damaged faith in the church cannot be underemphasized as a large number of Catholics are and will be angry and confused. People in positions of some authority also need to know what to say or do in terms of response when issues get to the media.

Conclusion

We know that the greatest issue is the proclamation of the Gospel in a way that will touch the hearts of the young and old. We are called to proclaim the good news but we must BE good news to the people we serve today. No wonder Pope Francis has declared the month of October 2019 the extraordinary missionary month.

The church in its mission from Jesus Christ must be open to greater transparency because we are sent to the world locally and globally. Our whole being is not just about keeping the faith but living visibly and distinctively what we claim to be. We are called like Jesus in his mission statement: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me and anointed me to preach good news to the poor. The Spirit has sent me to proclaim deliverance to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the Lord's year of favor" (Luke 4:18-19).

As an indicator or postscript, I emphasize the following: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon" each of us here, "has anointed" all of us, "to preach good news to the poor," the vulnerable, protecting especially defenseless children, seeking justice for the victims of abuse and taking steps to prevent this abuse from recurring, "to proclaim deliverance to the captives" — the perpetrators are in need of deliverance, conversion and transformation — "and recovery of sight to the blind," those who are not seeing the issues, or focusing on protecting "our own," or keeping silent or covering up need recovery of sight, "to release the oppressed and to proclaim the Lord's year of favor" by taking the necessary steps and maintaining zero tolerance with regard to sexual abuse we will release the oppressed. This is our year of favor let us courageously take up the responsibility to be truly transparent and accountable.

Returning to the title of this conference, another self-understanding passages is from (Matthew 5:14-16):

"You are the light of the world. A city set on a mountain cannot be hidden. Nor do they light a lamp and then put it under a bushel basket; it is set on a lampstand, where it gives light to all in the house. Just so, your light must shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your heavenly Father."

I read with great interest many articles about the pope's reactions in the case of the Chilean bishops — from a denial of accusations, to anger because of deception and cover up, to the acceptance of resignations of three of the bishops. I admire you, Brother Francis, for taking time as a true Jesuit, to discern and be humble enough to change your mind, to apologize and take action — an example for all of us.

Thank you, Pope Francis, for providing this opportunity for us to check and see where we have acted strangely, ignorantly, secretly and complacently. I believe we will change, with great determination, our total approach to reporting abuse, to supporting the victims, to getting the right people to mentor and give support to victims and, above all, to doing what we can to protect minors and vulnerable adults from any form of abuse. Thank you, too, for providing women religious, through the executive of the Union of Superiors General (UISG), an opportunity to participate in this conference. Women have acquired a lot of useful experience to offer in this field and have already done much to support victims and also to work creatively on their own use of power and authority.

I hope and pray that at the end of this conference we will choose deliberately to break any culture of silence and secrecy among us, to allow more light into our church. Let us acknowledge our vulnerability; be proactive not reactive in combating the challenges facing the world of the young and the vulnerable, and look fearlessly into other issues of abuse in the church and society.

May I remind all of us of Pope Francis' own words: "A Christian who does not move forward has an identity that is 'not well.' ... The Gospel is clear: The Lord sent them out saying: 'Go, go forward!' The Christian walks, moves past difficulties and announces that the Kingdom of God is near." Thank you.

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