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Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi, Pope Francis, Cardinal Blase Cupich of Chicago and television reporter Valentina Alazraki of Televisa are pictured during the third-day of a meeting on the protection of minors in the church at the Vatican Feb. 23. (CNS/Vatican Media)

by NCR Editorial Staff

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The recently completed meeting at the Vatican of heads of bishops' conferences from around the globe was the latest and most elaborate of the hierarchy's transactions with members of their own church and with the wider culture over clergy sex abuse.

For a church that proclaims Jesus, this has been a long, slow slog toward truth-telling and accountability. The transactions — from denial to reluctant reform — have been going on since the scandal was first reported nearly 34 years ago.

The recent meeting has the potential to mark a large step forward in the church's efforts to deal with the scandal and regain the trust of Catholics and others. It is essential, however, to note two factors that significantly qualify the meeting's success.

First, the gathering itself, extraordinary as it may have been, was, like most other advances in dealing with the crisis, forced by outside circumstances. The bishops were not called to Rome because it was the right thing to do. They were summoned, in part, because of extreme pressure that had built up behind ongoing revelations in a grand jury report of hierarchical malfeasance and because of the abuse of a child and seminarians by a well-known cardinal.

Second, the bishops returned home having yet to answer that ancient question, a line from the poet Juvenal, "Who will guard the guards?"

At the same time, the meeting was meaningful for a number of reasons, not least of which:

- It was finally an admission that the dual scandal of sexual abuse of children and minors by priests and the concomitant cover-up of the crimes by members of the hierarchy is a global phenomenon and requires radical rearrangement of church priorities if the behavior is to be stemmed and children protected.
- It contained a stunning admission by German Cardinal Reinhard Marx that he was certain that documents relating to abuse had been destroyed in Germany. If the promises of transparency and accountability that permeated the meeting have any real meaning, leaders of this summit, the pope in particular, will be calling for an immediate and robust independent investigation of the issue. Who destroyed the documents? When? What period of time did they cover?

How many cases were involved? Who in the Vatican was notified? If not, why not? A separate inquiry should be launched immediately to determine if other conferences around the world have destroyed documents.

- It was a distinctive meeting not only because it was a first to gather the world's bishops to discuss this awful crisis but also because it included searing testimony by victims, a rousing declaration by a journalist and a pointed challenge to the hierarchy (with direct remarks to the pope) by a woman religious.
- The bishops went home with marching orders, though sadly lacking in specifics, to devise plans for handling cases, including charges against bishops. The resulting plans are to be sent back and approved by the Vatican. The Vatican, for its part, promised a papal document laying out specific rules for how bishops are to handle abuse cases.

The verdict on the meeting, then, is mixed. It is simple justice to note that Pope Francis inherited a monumental mess and has done far more than either of his predecessors — and notably more than Pope John Paul II, during whose long reign the scandal emerged — to begin to change the clergy culture and hold bishops accountable.

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At the same time, his strong words of resolve during the meeting were weirdly blunted by a long introductory segment in his closing speech, going through reams of data establishing that sex abuse occurs everywhere, not just inside the church. That is a fact undisputed but not the least bit exculpatory in the case of the church, where ministers of the Gospel committed heinous crimes against children and then were protected by a secretive episcopal culture.

The meeting made clear on a global scale that there is no more room for denial or equivocating or trying to place blame elsewhere. The voices heard during this unusual gathering all seemed to have come to the same conclusion: The clerical culture must change and bishops must become accountable.

Anne Barrett Doyle of BishopAccountability.org gave expression to the mixed verdict. She regretted the failure of the meeting to come up with concrete internal reforms. "But in a larger sense, it achieved a great deal," she said. It became a place

where connections occurred "between journalists and survivors from many countries. This was public education on a massive scale," she said.

No doubt for some of the bishops, too.

This story appears in the **Vatican Abuse Summit** feature series. View the full series.

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