Vatican



Pope Francis reviews papers Feb. 23, the third day of a meeting on the protection of minors in the church at the Vatican. (CNS/Vatican Media)

Cindy Wooden

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For Pope Francis, 2019 included his sixth anniversary as pope, his 83rd birthday and his 50th anniversary as a priest, but it also was a year that saw him still confronted with the clerical sexual abuse crisis and with Vatican financial scandals.

He earned more points than ever on his frequent-flyer card, making seven foreign trips in 2019, traveling almost 52,000 miles to visit Panama for World Youth Day, the United Arab Emirates, Morocco, Bulgaria, North Macedonia, Romania, Mozambique, Madagascar, Mauritius, Thailand and Japan.

Continuing to push the idea of a "synodal church," one in which all the faithful are asked to reflect on specific issues and then the bishops gather to discern practical responses together, Francis hosted a special Synod of Bishops for the Amazon and issued his post-synod document on young people, *Christus Vivit*.

He also declared that the third Sunday of Ordinary Time — Jan. 26 in 2020 — would see a global Catholic focus on reading and praying with the Bible with a new celebration of the "Sunday of the Word of God."

On the first Sunday of Advent, he issued a short apostolic letter on the meaning and value of Nativity scenes as a prompt for prayer and contemplation and a simple but profound means of evangelization.

The creche, he wrote, "teaches us to contemplate Jesus, to experience God's love for us, to feel and believe that God is with us and that we are with him, his children, brothers and sisters all, thanks to that child who is the Son of God and the son of the Virgin Mary."

In early November, the "ad limina" visits of the bishops of the United States began; 15 regional groups of bishops are scheduled to make the weeklong visits by the end of February. Bishops in the first five groups reported spending more than two hours in a rather informal session with the pope, telling him about their dioceses and asking for advice.

While continuing to teach about the faith, especially about God's love and mercy, through his homilies at his intimate morning Masses in the chapel of his residence,

at visits to Rome parishes and in his Sunday Angelus addresses, Francis also was forced to deal head on with the ongoing scandal of clerical sexual abuse and attempts by bishops to cover up allegations.

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The year began with Francis writing a letter to U.S. bishops who were attending a spiritual retreat he had suggested they hold before trying to work out a specific system for handling allegations against bishops and holding each other accountable.

Writing to the bishops at the Jan. 2-8 retreat, the pope acknowledged that the scandal had created a "crisis of credibility" for the U.S. bishops, led to divisions within their body and, he said, to a temptation to look for administrative solutions to problems that go much deeper.

Without a clear and decisive focus on spiritual conversion and Gospel-inspired ways of responding to victims and exercising ministry, "everything we do risks being tainted by self-referentiality, self-preservation and defensiveness, and thus doomed from the start," the pope wrote.

The retreat took place before Francis' summit on the abuse crisis, a meeting in February with the heads of every bishops' conference in the world, the heads of the Eastern Catholic churches and superiors of men's and women's religious orders. For four days, they listened to speeches and survivors' testimonies, held discussions in small groups and celebrated a penitential liturgy and Mass.

At the end of the summit, the pope pledged to continue work on eight priorities: the protection of children; "impeccable seriousness" in dealing with clerical sexual abuse; genuine purification and acknowledgment of past failures; improved training for priests and religious; strengthening and continually reviewing the guidelines of national bishops' conferences; assisting victims of clerical sexual abuse; working to end online exploitation of children; and working with civil authorities to end sex tourism.

Less than three months after the summit, Francis issued *Vos estis lux mundi* ("You are the light of the world"), a set of revised and clarified norms and procedures for holding bishops and religious superiors accountable in protecting minors as well as in protecting members of religious orders and seminarians from abuse.

The document's title, from Matthew 5:14, frames the need for true accountability and a serious commitment to ending abuse within the very mission of the Catholic Church. "Our Lord Jesus Christ calls every believer to be a shining example of virtue, integrity and holiness," the pope wrote; obviously the opposite occurs when young people and vulnerable adults are abused or when bishops, priests and superiors use their position to harass or abuse seminarians and novices.



Pope Francis arrives to lead the World Youth Day prayer vigil at St. John Paul II Field in Panama City Jan. 26. (CNS/Paul Haring)

Three months after *Vos estis* was released, Francis reached out to priests around the world outraged by what some priests have done and sometimes being attacked publicly because of the crimes of others.

In the letter, published in August in conjunction with the 160th anniversary of the death of St. John Vianney, patron of priests, the pope said the crisis must lead to a time of "ecclesial purification" that "makes us realize that without (God) we are simply dust."

With the revelations of abuse and cover-up, he said, God "is rescuing us from hypocrisy, from the spirituality of appearances. He is breathing forth his spirit in order to restore the beauty of his bride, caught in adultery."

The abuse crisis is not the only scandal Francis has been forced to confront in an ongoing manner since his election in 2013. Vatican financial scandals continue to hit the news, but Francis said the latest scandal shows corrective measures put in place by Pope Benedict XVI and strengthened over the past six years are working.

At the beginning of October, Vatican police conducted a raid on offices in the Secretariat of State and in the Vatican financial oversight office following complaints of financial mismanagement. Five employees were suspended and, as the year ended, an official investigation was ongoing. The case, flagged by the Vatican bank, involves a loan requested by the Secretariat of State to finance a property development in London.

Francis told reporters in the November that the entire incident shows that the controls now in place to flag suspicious financial activity and possible corruption are working.

At the beginning of the year, dealing with another case of questionable financial practices, Francis has placed the Sistine Chapel Choir under the direct supervision of the office of papal liturgical ceremonies and appointed an archbishop as financial officer.

But December heralded happier notes with the publication of the short apostolic letter on Nativity scenes, the pope's 50th anniversary of priesthood Dec. 13 and his 83rd birthday Dec. 17.