Cardinal Giuseppe Versaldi, prefect of the Congregation for Catholic Education, gives a thumb

Cardinal Giuseppe Versaldi, prefect of the Congregation for Catholic Education, gives a thumbs up during the Oct. 14 inauguration of the Institute of Anthropology: Interdisciplinary Studies on Human Dignity and Care at the Pontifical Gregorian University. The new institute is dedicated to training experts in safeguarding against abuse and in the care of survivors. (CNS/M. Correa, Pontifical Gregorian University)



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The Catholic Church's leading institute for safeguarding and child protection has expanded with a revamped mission to provide a "culture of care for all human beings."

Such is the goal as articulated by Jesuit Superior General Fr. Arturo Sosa at the Pontifical Gregorian University's Institute of Anthropology: Interdisciplinary Studies on Human Dignity and Care at its Oct. 14 inauguration.

"The protection and security of vulnerable people is the yardstick by which we can measure how close we are to the goal of the reconciliation of all things in Christ," Sosa said.

"We cannot be complacent," Sosa said several times to a room of ambassadors, academics, priests and religious men and women, saying that the primary work of learning to listen to abuse victims and putting them at the center of concerns remain the safeguarding institute's core work.

Founded in 2012 as the Center for Child Protection, the Jesuit-backed program became the church's primary body tasked with understanding the realities of clergy abuse and working with the Vatican toward its prevention through a range of educational programming.

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Its expanded profile will allow the institute to employ its own faculty and grant academic degrees, including a diploma and licentiate in safeguarding and a doctorate in anthropology. The institute's scope will also include interdisciplinary and intercultural explorations of human dignity and threats to it.

The institute will continue to be headed by German Jesuit Fr. Hans Zollner, who in recent years has effectively become Pope Francis' point person on fighting sexual abuse, traveling the world to speak and provide training on safeguarding. In 2019, Zollner was one of the organizers of the Vatican's unprecedented abuse summit, which sought to coordinate a global response to the church's fight against clerical abuse.

On Oct. 7, outgoing German Chancellor Angela Merkel visited the institute's future academic home, before meeting with Pope Francis, where she told the pontiff the church must continue to tackle the abuse crisis head-on.

Zollner told attendees at the launch event that the institute is committed to that mission and that its interdisciplinary scholars, including theologians, psychiatrists, lawyers, philosophers and social scientists, will help "deepen our understanding of how these crippling wounds came about."

The work of the institute, he said, is aimed to help both the church and other organizations to understand what must be done to bring about systemic and institutional change.

"All humans deserve to be treated with dignity," he continued. "Women, men, old, young. It happens far too often that we disregard the reality that we are all born with this inherent dignity given to each and every human by the hands of God."

"This institute belongs to a greater movement and a change in the world that goes beyond simply acknowledging what has gone on oftentimes right underneath our noses," Zollner said.

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> — Jesuit Fr. Hans Zollner
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Baroness Sheila Hollins, a professor emeritus of psychiatry of intellectual disability at St. George's University of London, echoed those sentiments, saying that "there's a global call for accountability and transparency."

Hollins, who presided over the inaugural celebration, was appointed by Pope Francis to the Vatican's Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors in 2014. She praised the work of the institute and its mission to "make the world a safer place for children and adults who are in vulnerable situations."

Cardinal Giuseppe Versaldi, prefect of the Vatican's Congregation for Catholic Education and grand chancellor of the Pontifical Gregorian University, who approved the new institute's structure, said that it aligned with Pope Francis' conviction that "all educational institutions can converge on the value of human persons as the essential starting point for any human society worthy of that name."

Jesuit Fr. Hans Zollner is pictured in a 2016 file photo greeting clergy sex abuse victims. (CNS

Jesuit Fr. Hans Zollner, president of the Pontifical Gregorian University's new Institute of Anthropology: Interdisciplinary Studies on Human Dignity and Care, is pictured in a 2016 file photo greeting Andrew Collins, David Ridsdale and Peter Blenkiron at the Pontifical Gregorian University. The three men said they were child sex abuse victims in Australia. (CNS/Reuters/Tony Gentile)

Speaking via video link, Chilean clergy abuse survivor Juan Carlos Cruz lauded the work of Zollner and Pope Francis, who believed his experience of abuse after church leaders ignored his allegations for decades.

"I'm a resurrected man after having had my life destroyed," Cruz said. "But I am now someone who tries to solve this issue or help solve this issue from within."

He went on to describe the institute as a "lighthouse" fighting the "scourge of abuse and the culture of cover-up."

"Hopefully there will be many, many apostles of human dignity and care around the world that have been formed and have passed through your institute," Cruz said.