News
Vatican
Pope Francis gestures in front of Father Peter Harman, rector of the Pontifical North American

Pope Francis gestures in front of Father Peter Harman, rector of the Pontifical North American College, as he meets seminarians from the college during his general audience at the Vatican Sept. 29, 2021. (CNS photo/Paul Haring)

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Vatican City — October 18, 2021
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An adult survivor of abuse by a priest appealed to the world's seminarians to become good priests and to make sure the "bitter truth" always prevails, not silence about scandals and their cover-up.

"Please, do not sweep things under the carpet, because then they start to stink, putrefy, and the rug itself will rot away. ... Let us realize that if we hide these facts, when we keep our mouths shut, we hide the filth and we thus become a collaborator," said the survivor in a letter sent to Pope Francis and addressed to all seminarians.

To live in the truth is to follow the example of Jesus Christ, who never closed his eyes to sin or the sinner, but who "lived the truth with love ... (who) indicated the sin

and the sinner with bitter love," the letter said.

The letter, written in Italian, had been sent to Pope Francis, who then requested it be made public with the author's identity withheld, according to the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors, which republished the text of the letter on its website Oct. 18.

The commission's president, U.S. Cardinal Seán P. O'Malley, said, "During this time of renewal and pastoral conversion in which the church is facing the scandal and wounds of sexual abuse inflicted everywhere upon so many children of God, our Holy Father received from a survivor a courageous testimony offered to all seminarians."

By sharing this testimony publicly, "Pope Francis wants to welcome the voices of all wounded people and to show all priests who proclaim the Gospel the path that leads to authentic service of God to the benefit of all vulnerable people," the cardinal wrote in an introduction to the letter.

The woman writing the letter explained how she was harmed for years as a girl by a priest, leaving her with many serious mental health issues including dissociative identity disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, depression, insomnia, nightmares and a pervasive sense of fear — of others, of making mistakes, of being touched.

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"I am afraid of priests, of being near them," she wrote, and she can no longer go to Mass because this "sacred space" that used to be her second home now only triggers pain and fear.

She said she is trying to "survive, to feel joy, but in reality, it is an incredibly difficult battle."

She told the pope she was writing because she wanted that "the bitter truth prevail."

"I am here also in the name of other victims ... of children who have been deeply harmed, whose childhood, purity and respect have been stolen ... who were betrayed and whose boundless trust was taken advantage of ... of children whose

hearts beat, who breathe, who live ... but they have been killed once, twice, many times. ... Their souls have been turned into tiny bloody pieces," she wrote.

Adults who experienced "this hypocrisy" as children can never be rid of it; they can try to forget or forgive, "but the scars remain in their souls and never disappear," she said.

This abuse also harms the church, and "the church is my mother and it hurts so much when she is wounded, when she is soiled," the letter said.

"I want to ask you to protect the church, the body of Christ," she wrote in her appeal to seminarians.

The church "is full of wounds and scars. Please do not let those wounds become deeper and new ones occur," she wrote, reminding the seminarians that they have been called by God to be his instruments and to serve him through others.

"You have a great responsibility! A responsibility that is not a burden, but a gift" that should be handled "with humility and love!" she wrote.

The survivor appealed to seminarians to not try to hide or be silent about scandal, saying, "If we want to live the truth, we cannot close our eyes!"

"Please, realize you have received an enormous gift" of being "an incarnation of Christ in the world," she wrote. "People, and especially children, don't see (just) a person in you, but (they see) Christ, Jesus, in whom they trust all the same without limits."

"It is something enormous and strong, but also very fragile and vulnerable. Please be a good priest," she wrote.