News



Sarah Pearson, in black coat, was part of a group of sex abuse survivors who called on U.S. bishops, in a Nov. 16 press conference in Baltimore, to focus less on who can take Communion and instead do more about sex abuse. Survivors, outside the fall meeting of U.S. bishops, also said they were concerned with the "pernicious idea" from the group Church Militant protesting nearby that homosexuality is linked to pedophilia and called on bishops and Pope Francis to denounce it. (CNS/Rhina Guidos)



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On the first of two days of public sessions during the U.S. bishops' fall general assembly, a group of sex abuse survivors in a Nov. 16 news conference called on the prelates meeting in Baltimore to focus less on who can take Communion and instead do more to end sex abuse and other abuses by clergy.

The survivors also demanded the bishops condemn a group that was holding a nearby protest claiming homosexuality is linked to pedophilia.

"We wanted to come here today on behalf of survivors, a group of survivors of sexual abuse who are committed to fighting for justice and to also highlight what's not being talked about when they're focused on the Eucharist," said Sarah Pearson, a sex abuse survivor from Wisconsin who joined other members of the organization Ending Clergy Abuse in addressing bishops.

"They've shown us in focusing on this culture war, about the Eucharist, what they care about and what's important to them: talking about one man's ability to take Communion," Pearson said in an apparent reference to President Joe Biden, a Catholic who supports legal abortion.

"Meanwhile, there's millions of Catholics around the world who've been impacted by this [sex abuse] issue," she said, "and they're not being recognized inside there [the hotel where the bishops were meeting)] today and that's a shame."

The bishops still had to debate and vote on their statement on the Eucharist and an early version of it — without amendments — did not specifically call out Biden and

other Catholic politicians who support abortion.

The survivors also demanded that the bishops, as a group, denounce Church Militant, a right-wing group that had organized a rally nearby, and the ideas they said the group was dispersing.

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"Bishops have an opportunity here to address what's being said out here," said Peter Isely of Ending Clergy Abuse, indicating the nearby pavilion where Church Militant was holding a rally, which former Donald Trump adviser Steve Bannon and far-right polemicist right-wing agitator Milo Yiannopoulos were to address.

"The primary thing that we're most concerned [about], as survivors of sexual abuse from around the world," Isely said, "is this really pernicious, dangerous position that this group Church Militant, Steven Bannon, and others have taken, that homosexuality is linked to pedophilia, and this is the excuse that they have generated for why there has been so much abuse in the church."

Isely, Pearson and Tim Law, founder of Ending Clergy Abuse, spoke to Catholic News Service following the news conference they held just as bishops began the first of two days of public sessions during their Nov. 15-18 meeting. It was the first time the prelates had met in person since the pandemic.

Various groups protested their gathering outside the hotel where the meeting was held.

Security guards and police were dispersed near the hotel; a helicopter flew overhead of the pavilion where Church Militant held its rally. About 20 people showed up to protest that gathering.

Law claimed that by not condemning the group, the bishops "are supporting an agenda that is wrong and that is demonizing and scapegoating a class of people."

"They are failing to denounce Church Militant and what that group is saying, and some probably believe in their heart a lot of what they are saying," he said.

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A few days before, members of Church Militant tweeted a photo of some of its members with Bishop Joseph Strickland of Tyler, Texas, and said they had received his blessing. But some of the Church Militant supporters carried signs also criticizing the bishops, calling them "Judases" and one dressed up in a wolf's costume wearing a miter.

"The bishops and Pope Francis need to speak out forcefully that pedophilia and homosexuality" are not same thing, Law said.

Isely said the comparison was harmful, in particular to victims of clergy sex abuse who are gay and who struggle to cope with what has happened and who sometimes contemplate and carry out suicide because of it.

"They're a particularly vulnerable group," he said. "This compounding of precarious messages that they're hearing digs deeply into their minds, into the hearts ... and that simply has to stop."

A news release from Ending Clergy Abuse accused Church Militant of having "capitalized off the rape and sexual abuse of children, using their suffering as an opportunity to court donors and gain followers."

The organization said that Church Militant, "at the behest of wealthy donors," has a propaganda network "to mobilize support for their agenda of recriminalizing homosexuality by fear-mongering about the LGBTQ+ community and other marginalized groups."

"By attributing the Catholic clergy abuse crisis to gay priests," said Ending Clergy Abuse, Church Militant has "contributed to heightened stigma around gay men while ignoring every non-male victim of clergy abuse."

This story appears in the **USCCB Fall Assembly 2021** feature series. View the full series.