News
Vatican
Pope Francis is pictured during an interview with Maria João Avillez of CNN Portugal at the Vat

Pope Francis is pictured during an interview with Maria João Avillez of CNN Portugal at the Vatican Aug. 11, 2022. During the lengthy interview, the pope called sexual abuse "diabolical" and a "monstrosity" and said there is "zero tolerance" for those in the church who are guilty of abuse. (CNS screenshot/CNN Portugal)

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Calling sexual abuse "diabolical" and a "mostrosity," Pope Francis underlined there is "zero tolerance" for those in the church who are guilty of abuse.

"One very key thing is zero tolerance. Zero. A priest cannot continue being a priest if he is an abuser. He cannot act (as a priest) because he is sick or a criminal," the pope said in an interview with CNN Portugal.

"If he is a priest, he is there to lead people to God and not to destroy people in the name of God. Zero tolerance and we must not stop at that," he said.

The lengthy interview was recorded Aug. 11 at the Vatican and aired in two segments over two evenings, Sept. 4-5. Reporters at the Vatican were provided a transcript of the interview in Spanish by CNN Portugal.

The interview covered a wide range of topics, such as the liturgy, the role of women, the importance of dialogue, synodality, prayer life and World Youth Day, which is to be held in Lisbon, Portugal, Aug. 1-6, 2023.

The pope was asked about the anger people may feel toward the church because of the abuse carried out by some of its members and how those cases were handled.

"Abuse by men and women of the church -- abuse of authority, abuse of power and sexual abuse, is a monstrosity because the man or woman of the church -- whether priest, religious or layperson, was called to serve and create unity, to foster growth, and abuse always destroys," the pope said.

Most abuse occurs and remains hidden in families, he said, and it is estimated 3% of reported abuse was perpetrated by members of the church -- a number that is still too high, the pope said.

Even if there were just one perpetrator, "it's a monstrosity," he said. Unfortunately, the culture of abuse is widespread in the world, but "I look at this one that exists (in the church) and that I am responsible that it doesn't happen again, right?"

"Let's take the percentage that concerns us and go after that," he said.

Celibacy is not the reason for abuse, as can be seen with abusive family members who are not celibate, he said.

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Abuse in the church "is simply the monstrosity of a man or woman of the church, who is psychologically sick or evil, and uses their position for their personal satisfaction. It's diabolical" and it must be faced, he said.

CNN Portugal asked the pope about his efforts to maintain dialogue with the leaders of Ukraine and Russia.

"I always believe that if we talk, we can move forward," he said.

"You know who doesn't know how to dialogue? Animals. They are pure instinct," he said. "On the other hand, dialogue is putting aside instinct and listening. Dialogue is difficult," and it has to be learned first in the family.

Although he has so far been unable to fulfill his desire to visit Kyiv or Moscow to facilitate peace, "I do what I can, and I ask everyone to do what they can. We can all do something," he said, adding that "it is a very tragic situation."

Discussing the role of women in the church, particularly his appointing a number of women to top Vatican positions, he said this did not signal some kind of "feminist trend," but was "an act of justice that was culturally neglected."

Imagine being asked, "Do you want to do something for the church?" and then being told, "'Become a nun.' No. You can be a laywoman, a laywoman who is working," even at the Vatican, he said.

"I didn't invent this (hiring women at the Vatican). It's been going on for the last 20, 30 years and is slowly being implemented," he said.

Talking about World Youth Day, the interviewer told the pope that young people and the world were eagerly awaiting his visit next year and his message.

"I plan to go. The pope will go, either Francis goes or John XXIV goes, but the pope is going," he said with a laugh.