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Jesuit Fr. Hans Zollner, a member of the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors, po

Jesuit Fr. Hans Zollner, a member of the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors, poses in Rome Nov. 9, 2021. (CNS/KNA/Francesco Pistilli)



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One of Pope Francis' key advisers on clergy sexual abuse admitted that the pontiff's signature effort to confront abuse and cover-up is "very often" not working, as part of a virtual conversation with Catholic abuse survivors on March 2.

Jesuit Fr. Hans Zollner spoke about *Vos estis lux mundi*, a sweeping set of laws issued by Francis in 2019, as part of a question-and-answer session with survivors of clergy sexual abuse sponsored by Awake Milwaukee, a Catholic group focused on sexual abuse in the Catholic Church.

Zollner, a member of the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors, responded to a variety of questions from survivors Esther Harber and Mike Koplinka-Loehr and then took questions from anonymous survivors in the audience.

Asked whether there was recourse for survivors who feel their cases have not been properly handled, Zollner explained that there are theoretically a variety of avenues for appeal in *Vos estis*, if survivors feel that their bishop or diocese has improperly handled their case. However, he said, "I can also tell you that very often I realize

that it's not working."

He encouraged survivors in those situations to "document everything."

Zollner agreed with an anonymous survivor who said that *Vos estis* was not being applied consistently or transparently. He noted that 10 bishops in Poland had been "basically dismissed" but that has not been the case everywhere.

The lack of transparency is often "connected to something that I would describe as complicity in just trying to preserve the good name of one particular person," said Zollner. However, he said this reasoning was irrational.

"By doing so, you harm much more the reputation of the person and much more the reputation of the institution," Zollner said.

Zollner also criticized *Vos estis*' broad definition of a "vulnerable person" who could be at risk of abuse. He said the definition was "not helpful" because it is "so broad" as to include a wide range of people.

Vos estis defines a "vulnerable person" as "any person in a state of infirmity, physical or mental deficiency, or deprivation of personal liberty which, in fact, even occasionally, limits their ability to understand or to want or otherwise resist" an abuse.

Said Zollner: "Do you really want to be a 'vulnerable person' because you are a woman and because you are a parishioner? I don't think so."

The Jesuit said he prefers language such as "the person at risk" but that he is still developing his thoughts on the matter.

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Zollner said an important reason that survivors can lack support in the U.S. is because of the country's litigious culture.

He said that for many in the church "the most important priority" is attending to "the advice of lawyers," which prevents church representatives from sitting down and listening to survivors because they think they are exposing themselves to risk.

Beyond his evaluations of *Vos estis*, Zollner offered suggestions for a path forward. He suggested that periodic changes in the leadership of religious communities or dioceses could prevent abuse.

"If you have a bishop who is 25 years in the same diocese," Zollner said, many things may become so "habitual" and "unconsciously accepted" that "the danger of becoming abusive" grows "exponentially year after year."

Zollner also urged the church to make supporting survivors a primary priority.

"Today, it is our mission to listen to survivors and that means investment of space, personnel, formation," he said.

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