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Pope Francis speaks into a microphone next to a man in a red zucchetto and a brown tunic

Boston Cardinal Seán P. O'Malley, president of the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors, listens as Pope Francis speaks during a meeting with members of the commission at the Vatican April 29, 2022. O'Malley says he is grateful for Francis' "faith and confidence in my assistance" as a member of the Council of Cardinals. (CNS photo/Vatican Media)



Justin McLellan

Vatican Correspondent

View Author Profile

jmclellan@ncronline.org
Follow on Twitter at @m/McLellan_Js



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Establishing clear procedures for protecting vulnerable people against abuse "must become a priority in every local church," Pope Francis said.

In a message to participants at the second Latin American congress on the prevention of abuse, the pope said that while church leaders have done much to combat the evil of abuse, it remains a "clear and present danger" to the faithful that "continues to degrade the Lord's Gospel in the eyes of all."

Under the theme "care, inform and communicate," the conference in Asunción, Paraguay, March 14-16 brought together scholars, pastors and child protection experts to reflect on how to better protect minors in Latin America from abuse.

Francis noted that special attention must be given to ensuring the measures created in his 2019 apostolic letter "Vox Estis Lux Mundi," which called for clear and accessible paths to justice for abuse victims, be implemented in "parts of the church where efforts to promote adequate preventative measures are still in their first stages due to a lack of resources."

"We should not allow the cruel inequalities that affect our societies to affect our church," he wrote.

Any member of the church hierarchy who downplays the impact of the church's abuse crisis or the danger posed by abuse to the church "dishonors those who have suffered so much and deceives those they say they serve," the pope said.

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As an example of action the church is taking to address the abuse crisis, the pope noted that he charged the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors to provide an annual audit of what the church is doing to protect minors.

Speaking to the congress' participants in Paraguay, U.S. Cardinal Seán O'Malley, president of the Vatican safeguarding commission, said that preventing abuse in Latin America "is more than the implementation of a code of conduct," it is "embedded in a broader culture of care."

"To call ourselves 'believers' would be to ensure that our faith translates into being promoters of care, integrity and the safety of those who make up our community,"

he said.

The cardinal said the pontifical commission is currently developing a program to be implemented with national bishops' conferences that will help train anti-abuse specialists and establish listening centers for victims in dioceses around the world.

"Making prevention efforts visible in dioceses makes our talk about the church more credible," said O'Malley.

Francis doubled the size of the safeguarding commission by appointing 10 new members in September. Five of the commission's 20 members are from Latin America.