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Jesuit Fr. Hans Zollner speaks to reporters after a news conference at the headquarters of the

Jesuit Fr. Hans Zollner speaks to reporters after a news conference at the headquarters of the Italian Foreign Press Association in Rome, Italy, April 17, 2023. (CNS photo/Justin McLellan)



Justin McLellan

Vatican Correspondent

View Author Profile

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



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The pope's safeguarding commission, preparing to move into a fresco-ceilinged palace in Rome's historic center, must not be merely engaged in "PR," but become a refuge for those abused by clergy and silenced by the church, said leading

safeguarding expert Jesuit Fr. Hans Zollner.

Speaking to journalists April 17 about his decision to leave the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors, Zollner expressed his hope that the commission's new home will push the commission to take seriously the principles of "transparency, compliance and responsibility," the lack of which he cited as the reason for his departure.

The new center must be "a central focus point of encounters with victims from around the globe," he said. "This is what people are looking for."

After nearly 10 years of serving on the pope's advisory body, Zollner said that "it is a continuous impression on the part of victims that they are not listened to," and without naming individuals, he said there are people in the church, who "for personal or emotional reasons, create obstacles" in the fight against abuse.

Zollner cited "structural and practical issues" with the commission in a statement released March 29, the date his resignation became public.

Currently about 20 members serve on the commission, whose task, according to Pope Francis when he established it, is to advise him on "the most opportune initiatives for protecting minors and vulnerable adults" and "to promote local responsibility in the particular churches."

Zollner is not the first member of the papal commission to resign. In 2017, two prominent members who were also abuse survivors also left the commission: Marie Collins who in an exclusive article for National Catholic Reporter cited "resistance," "reluctance" and a "lack of cooperation" from the then-doctrinal congregation; and Peter Saunders, who said he was frustrated with the pace of change and "disappointed" the commission was not doing what he thought it was intended to achieve.

Zollner's resignation was made public in a statement by the commission's president, Boston Cardinal Seán O'Malley, who Zollner said "put roses and flowers" on his departure but did not address the problems he claimed to have repeatedly raised to the commission's leadership.

At the news conference, Zollner referenced the "rather intense" changes in recent months that led to a lack of transparency in the selection of the commission's

members and made their role in the commission unclear.

The commission's members, Zollner said, no longer proposed projects but were merely assigned tasks, blurring the lines of responsibility of the commission's members, staff and academic experts.

"If one doesn't know what they are responsible for" or "who they report to and on what criteria, it leaves people confused," he said. "This created difficulty not only in terms of compliance -- how we can follow clear rules -- but also transparency."

When those principles are threatened, "the door to abuse and coverup opens," he said.

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Zollner said there were already problems before Francis put the commission within the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith in June 2022, but nearly a year after the new organization went into force he said he still does not understand how the two bodies are meant to work together.

He also clarified that his resignation was not intended to personally attack anyone or impede the work of the commission, which he called "a success in itself and a great idea by Pope Francis" and one that has an "intrinsic value."

"I've seen with my own eyes how Pope Francis takes his time and listens to victims, and he is an example of the attitude that the church must have," including its bishops, clergy and laypeople who "don't always want to listen."

As director of the Institute of Anthropology: Interdisciplinary Studies on Human Dignity and Care at Rome's Pontifical Gregorian University, Zollner said he remained optimistic about efforts to fight abuse in the church and "always had the impression that the commitment to true justice and prevention is increasing."

Yet he acknowledged that "many victims no longer expect anything" from the church. Still, there are others that hope to "just once meet the human face of the church."

"For me the greatest pain is that they don't find it," he said. "If the church doesn't serve the last, the forgotten, the wounded, then it makes no sense."