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Pope Francis poses for a photograph with staff and members of the Pontifical Commission for

Pope Francis poses for a photograph with staff and members of the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors and its leadership, U.S. Cardinal Seán P. O'Malley of Boston, commission president, and Oblate Fr. Andrew Small, commission secretary, during an audience at the Vatican May 5, 2023. The commission was holding its plenary assembly May 3-6 at the commission's new offices in Rome. (CNS/Vatican Media)

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Safeguarding minors and vulnerable persons must be a priority for everyone in the church, Pope Francis said.

"The principles of respect for the dignity of all, for right conduct and a sound way of life must become a universal rule, independent of people's culture or economic and social condition," he said during an audience May 5 with staff and members of the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors at the Vatican.

"All the church's ministers must respect this rule in the way they serve the faithful and they, in turn, must be treated with respect and dignity by those who lead the community," he said. "Indeed, a culture of safeguarding will only take root if there is a pastoral conversion in this regard among the church's leaders."

The commission — led by Cardinal Seán P. O'Malley of Boston, commission president, and Oblate Fr. Andrew Small, commission secretary — was holding its plenary assembly May 3–6 at the commission's new offices in the center of Rome.

The plenary came several weeks after Jesuit Fr. Hans Zollner, a longtime member of the commission, resigned, citing among the reasons for his departure: "structural and practical issues" with the commission and a lack of "transparency, compliance and responsibility."

Zollner had 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 did not understand how the two bodies were meant to work together.

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In his speech to the commission, the pope said that since it was the first papal audience since the commission was formally established within the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, "I would like to provide you with some suggestions."

"The failure to act properly to halt this evil (of sexual abuse) and to assist its victims has sullied our witness to God's love," he said.

In fact, sins of omission, he said, "are very real, and they hurt the community as much as others, if not more so."

However, he said, "we have not remained silent or inactive" in response to the failures.

For example, he said his document, "Vos Estis Lux Mundi" (You are the light of the world), on the responsibilities and accountability of leaders, "is now permanently in place" as a definitive and no longer "experimental" part of church procedures.

The document also sets standards for the pastoral support of victims and it "calls, in particular, for setting aside places for receiving accusations and caring for those who report that they have been harmed," the pope said.

"To be sure, improvements can be made on the basis of experience, by episcopal conferences and individual bishops," he added.

Commission members, he said, are "using your skills and expertise to help repair a terrible scourge in the church by working to assist the various particular churches" because "the importance of safeguarding minors and vulnerable persons must be the rule for everyone" from a diocese and "its parishes and seminary to the training of catechists, teachers and other pastoral workers."

Cardinal Seán P. O'Malley of Boston, president of the Pontifical Commission for the Protection

Cardinal Seán P. O'Malley of Boston, president of the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors, speaks to Pope Francis during an audience with commission members at the Vatican May 5, 2023. (CNS/Vatican Media)

He said he was encouraged by the commission's plans to help with training programs and assistance to victims in Africa, Asia and Latin America.

"It is not right that the most prosperous areas of the world should have well-trained and well-funded safeguarding programs, where victims and their families are respected, while in other parts of the world they suffer in silence, perhaps rejected or stigmatized," he said.

"Efforts to improve guidelines and standards for the conduct of clergy and religious must continue," he said, asking that he be informed about these efforts and receive an annual report "on what you consider to be working well or otherwise, so that appropriate changes can be made."

The pope also outlined three principles that are "part of a spirituality of reparation."

The first, he said, is wherever "harm was done to people's lives, we are called to keep in mind God's creative power to make hope emerge from despair and life from death."

This means that no matter how difficult and demanding the task ahead, "I urge you not to get bogged down; keep reaching out, keep trying to instill confidence in those

you meet and who share with you this common cause. Do not grow discouraged when it seems that little is changing for the better."

Pope Francis addresses the leadership, staff and members of the Pontifical Commission for th

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The second principle, he said, is to seek to heal the consequences of abuse and the wounds, brokenness and division it has caused. "Our lives are not meant to remain divided" and "where life is broken, then, I ask you to help put pieces back together, in the hope that what is broken can be repaired."

An example of this, he said, would be what happened recently with one group of survivors who were finally invited to sit down with the leadership of the religious institute that ran the school where they were abused decades ago.

These men wanted to "live out their remaining years in peace," which meant "resuming their relationship with the church that had hurt them," the pope said. They wanted to be heard and believed, and they wanted closure, especially regarding questions "that had haunted them."

"Third, I encourage you to cultivate an approach that mirrors the respect and kindness of God himself," he said, quoting Maya Angelou, poet and activist, who wrote that "people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel."

"So be gentle in your actions, bearing one another's burdens without complaining, but considering that this moment of reparation for the church will give way to a further moment in the history of salvation," he said.

"Now is the time to repair the damage done to previous generations and to those who continue to suffer," the pope said, reminding them that a new time is being prepared by God, "made fruitful by the work and tears we share with those who have suffered."

"That is why it is important that we never stop pressing ahead," he said.