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Pope Francis listens to a young person during a meeting with university students at the Catholic University of Portugal Aug. 3, 2023 in Lisbon. (CNS/Vatican Media)



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Pope Francis on Aug. 2 capped off his first day in Portugal by meeting with 13 clergy abuse survivors, tackling head on an issue that was expected to loom large over his five-day visit here.

The meeting comes after an independent commission released a report earlier this year chronicling how Catholic clergy members in Portugal had abused more than 4,800 children since 1950. The report sent shock waves through the country and survivors blasted the sluggish response of the Portuguese hierarchy following the report's release.

In a brief statement the Vatican said that the private meeting, which was held at the Vatican's Portuguese embassy, lasted over an hour and was a time of "intense listening."

Earlier in the day, during an address to the country's priests and bishops, the pope alluded to the country's abuse crisis where he lamented "our poor witness and the scandals that have marred" the church.

The current reckoning, he said, should "call us to a humble and ongoing purification, starting with the anguished cry of the victims, who must always be accepted and listened to."

The pope arrived here in Portugal to preside over World Youth Day, a Catholic youth festival that takes place in a different world city every few years. In response to the abuse commission's findings, the local church had planned to build a monument to abuse victims to be unveiled during the events of World Youth Day.

Those plans were nixed a few weeks ahead of the pope's arrival in the country. A survivors' group has put up instead a billboard in the city center with the statement "4,800+ Children Abused by the Catholic Church in Portugal."

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Ahead of the pope's speech to the country's Catholic leaders, Bishop José Ornelas, head of the Portuguese bishops' conference, affirmed the hierarchy's "special attention to the protection of the welfare of children and the undertaking to protect them from all kinds of abuse."

Yet prior to the pope's arrival, Portuguese religion reporter Filipe d'Avillez had characterized the bishops' initial response to the commission's findings as a "disaster" and hurried in an attempt to handle the issue prior to the papal visit.

In a statement following the pope's Aug. 2 meeting with survivors, Anne Barrett Doyle, co-director of the website BishopAccountability.org, blasted Francis for allegedly only meeting with victims in his visits abroad when the abuse issue is already in the spotlight.

"When the Pope visits a country where the bishops are not reckoning with headlines about abuse, he does not meet with victims," she wrote. "He did not hold such meetings in Hungary, the Congo, Romania, or Panama, even though the church's victims in each of those countries surely also number in the thousands."

"The thousands of people who were sexually abused as children in the Portuguese church deserve better," the statement continued. "They deserve the 'concrete actions' that the Pope repeatedly has promised."

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