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A group of people including prelates, sisters and lay people pose for a picture in an ornately d

Members of the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors pose for a photo after Mass in St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican during a plenary assembly Sept. 20-22, 2023. (CNS photo/Courtesy Christian Alvarez)

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The synod on synodality should dedicate substantial discussion to addressing sexual abuse in the church and include the voices of survivors, the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors said.

"We ask that sexual abuse in the church permeate your discussions as they address teaching, ministry, formation and governance," the commission said in a written "Call to Action" released Sept. 27.

"While at times it may seem like a daunting set of questions to face, please rise to the challenge so that you may address, in a comprehensive way, the threat posed by sexual abuse to (the) church's credibility in announcing the Gospel," it added.

The 19-member international papal commission, led by Cardinal Seán P. O'Malley of Boston, released the call to action on occasion of the upcoming assembly of the Synod of Bishops Oct. 4-29 at the Vatican and the consistory for the creation of new cardinals Sept. 30.

The three top priorities, the commission said, were: greater "solidarity with victims and survivors in light of ongoing revelations of abuse"; increased commitment and resources by church leaders to promote safeguarding everywhere; and giving safeguarding a more prominent place in discussions at the synod on synodality.

"The reality of sexual abuse in our church goes to the heart of the synod's agenda," it said. "It permeates discussions on leadership models, ministry roles, professional standards of behavior and of being in right relationship with one another and all of creation."

"We urge you to dedicate meaningful time and space to integrate the testimony of victim/survivors into your work," it said, as well as the experience synod participants have had in "confronting or dealing with sexual abuse in the church."

The church and its members must aim for a number of "long-overdue goals," it said, including:

-- Being a place of welcome, empathy and reconciliation for those impacted by abuse and a strong advocate "against the endemic complacency of those in the church and society that silence these testimonies, minimize their significance and stifle hope for renewal."

-- Taking "full account and full responsibility for the wrongs done to so many in its care."

-- Protecting all children with "appropriate safety policies and procedures, ones that are known and verified."

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-- Having well-run, "transparent and accessible systems of redress for wrongdoing by the church's ministers."

-- Implementing and taking responsibility for "robust safeguarding" in dioceses, parishes, schools, hospitals, retreat centers, houses of formation and everywhere the church is present and active.

The commission urged synod participants to work toward these goals, "not just for one or two days during your gathering, but to consider them throughout the entire synod process."

"Their achievement will be a singular sign of the synod's success, a sign that we are walking with the wounded and the forgotten as disciples of the one Lord, in search of a better way," it said.

The commission also said that "recent publicly reported cases point to tragically harmful deficiencies in the norms intended to punish abusers and hold accountable those whose duty is to address wrongdoing."

"We are long overdue in fixing the flaws in procedures that leave victims wounded and in the dark both during and after cases have been decided," it said, adding that the commission will continue to study what is not working and to press for necessary changes.

It also called for conversion among all church leaders as "deep frustrations remain, especially among those seeking justice for the wrongs done to them."

"No one should have to beg for justice in the church. The unacceptable resistance that remains points to a scandalous lack of resolve by many in the church that is often compounded by a serious lack of resources."

As the College of Cardinals gathers for the Sept. 30 consistory, it said, "we call upon all those in the sacred college to remember victims and their families and to include as part of their oath of fidelity a commitment to remain steadfast in honoring those impacted by sexual abuse by uniting with them in the common pursuit of truth and justice. All bishops and religious superiors should echo this commitment."

"Together with all those who are worn down by abuse and its consequences, we say, 'Enough!' " the commission's statement said.

This story appears in the **Synod on Synodality** feature series. View the full series.
A version of this story appeared in the **Oct 13-26, 2023** print issue under the headline: Papal commission asks synod to make safeguarding a bigger priority.