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Pope Francis shares a moment with children after his weekly general audience in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican March 6, 2024. (CNS/Lola Gomez)



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The Catholic Church should not be discouraged by the challenge of confronting sex abuse, Pope Francis said, rather it must take concrete steps in developing policies to preserve the dignity of its members.

"In confronting the scandal of abuse and the suffering of victims, we might well grow discouraged, since the challenge of restoring the fabric of broken lives and of healing pain is enormous and complex," the pope said in a written speech. "Yet our commitment must not wane; indeed, I encourage you to move forward, so that the church will be, always and everywhere, a place where everyone can feel at home and each person is treated as sacred."

Meeting March 7 with members of the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors during their plenary assembly, the pope had an aide, Msgr. Pierluigi Giroli, read his message to the group.

Cardinal Seán P. O'Malley of Boston, president of the commission, was also present at the meeting.

In his message, Francis made reference to the annual report on the church's child protection efforts he requested from the commission in April 2022, the first version of which is expected to be completed this year. The pope wrote that the report "should not be just another document, but should help us better to appreciate the work that still lies ahead."

He also praised the work of the commission's "Memorare Initiative," which aims to provide safeguarding training and qualified staff to local churches in various countries, and he said the initiative is a concrete way for the commission to demonstrate its closeness to church leaders in strengthening abuse prevention efforts.

In December 2023, the commission announced that it would give 230,000 euros (about $250,600) in grants as part of the initiative to fund five projects in different countries to support safeguarding, primarily through providing training workshops.

In his speech the pope encouraged the commission to imitate Christ's compassion and "his way of touching the wounds of humanity" to effectively carry out its service to the church.

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Protecting minors in the church "is no abstract concept, but a very concrete reality comprised of listening, preventing and assisting," he wrote. "All of us, especially church authorities, are called to acknowledge firsthand the impact of abuse and to be deeply moved by the suffering of victims."

The pope encouraged the commission members to listen directly to the voices of abuse survivors, take practical decisions to support them and respond to those who have been abused with "heartfelt closeness."

"These brothers and sisters of ours must be welcomed and listened to, since neglecting to do so can greatly aggravate their suffering," the pope wrote.

Francis acknowledged that while most work in safeguarding is rightfully carried out confidentially out of respect for survivors, "its fruits ought to become visible."

"People should know and see how you are accompanying local churches in their ministry of safeguarding minors," he wrote, adding that their closeness to local church officials helps spread best practices and ensure that adequate safeguarding measures are being implemented.

Francis recalled that he had asked the commission to ensure the compliance of local churches with "Vos Estis Lux Mundi" -- his 2019 decree, updated in 2023, which

revised and clarified norms and procedures for holding bishops and religious superiors accountable -- "so that reliable means are in place for welcoming and caring for victims and survivors, as well as for ensuring that the experience and witness of these communities support the work of protection and prevention."

He urged the commission to continue its work so that the church may "continue to be fully committed to the prevention of abuse, its firm condemnation, the provision of compassionate care for victims and ongoing commitment to being a welcoming and safe place."