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Pope Francis receives a gift from Ilva M. Hoyos Castañeda, a lawyer from Colombia, during a meeting with CEPROME, a safeguarding research and formation center from Latin America, at the Vatican Sept. 25, 2023. (CNS/Vatican Media)



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The work of protecting minors and other vulnerable people in the Catholic Church involves holding those in positions of power accountable for the abuse they commit, Pope Francis said.

The church's safeguarding efforts "must undoubtedly aim at eradicating situations that protect those who hide behind their positions to impose themselves on others in a perverse way," the pope wrote in a message to participants in a safeguarding conference.

In the message, released March 12, he also said the church must try to understand why such people are "unable to relate to others in a healthy way."

The papal message was sent to a three-day conference in Panama City organized by the Research and Formation Center for the Protection of Minors, also known as CEPROME Latin America.

Titled "Vulnerability and Abuse: Toward a Wider View of Prevention," the conference was designed to discuss "the handling of power and authority in the church" and to broaden conversations about abusive conduct beyond the crime of sexual abuse to include "abuses of power, authority, conscience and spirituality," organizers said.

The Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors, which was one of the groups involved in organizing the conference, had announced March 8 the approval of a study group "to examine the reality of vulnerable persons in the context of the Church's ministry and how this informs safeguarding efforts."

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In his message to the participants in Panama City, Francis wrote that God is calling the church to "an absolute change in mentality regarding our conception of relationships," and that Christians must give priority to "the least, the poor, the servant (and) the uneducated over the greater, the rich, the master, the learned, based on the ability to accept the grace that is given to us by God and to make ourselves a gift to others."

"Seeing one's own weakness as an excuse to stop being whole persons and whole Christians, incapable of taking control of their destiny, will create childish, resentful people and in no way represents the littleness to which Jesus invites us," he wrote. Instead, the pope urged the participants to imitate St. Paul who "boasted in his weaknesses and trusted in the grace of the Lord."

Yet Francis wrote that the church "cannot be indifferent to the reasons why some people accept to go against their own conscience, out of fear, or allow themselves to be deceived by false promises, knowing in their heart of hearts that they are on the wrong path."

"Humanizing relationships" in society and the church, he wrote, "means working hard to form mature, coherent persons who, firm in their faith and ethical principles, are capable of confronting evil (and) bearing witness to the truth."

He added that any society that lacks such moral integrity will be "ill, with human and institutional relationships perverted by selfishness, distrust, fear and deceit."

More than 20 members of CEPROME's advisory board from throughout Latin America met with Francis at the Vatican in September 2023. They discussed methods for advancing abuse prevention and the pope condemned the accessibility of child pornography.