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Seated between Belgium's Queen Mathilde and King Philippe, Pope Francis addresses government and civic leaders and members of the diplomatic corps in the Grand Gallery of the Castle of Laeken in Brussels Sept. 2. Francis will spend three days in Belgium. (CNS/Lola Gomez)



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Pope Francis on Sept. 27 kicked off a three-day trip to Belgium by asking forgiveness for the church's shameful record on clergy abuse, but was met with a challenge by the country's prime minister that "words alone do not suffice."

"We also need concrete steps," said Belgian Prime Minister Alexander De Croo. "Victims need to be heard. They need to be at the center. They have a right to truth. Misdeeds need to be recognized."

The prime minister's unusually sharp remarks spotlighted an issue that has loomed large over the pope's visit here ever since it was first announced and where the local church is reeling from the fallout of a damning 2023 documentary on clergy abuse.

The documentary has prompted the Belgian Federal Parliament and the regional Flemish assembly to launch investigations into the church's handling of cases and to revisit how the country's law enforcement potentially botched an earlier abuse inquiry some 15 years ago.

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> —Belgian Prime Minister Alexander De Croo
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"When something goes wrong we cannot accept cover-ups," the prime minister told the pope, in front of an audience of the country's royal family and other government officials. "To be able to look into the future, the church needs to come clean on its past."

Also offering a sharp condemnation of the church's record on abuse was King Philippe, who said that it has taken "far too long" for the cries of victims to be heard and acknowledged by the church.

The church in Belgium, said the king, "must continue resolutely and relentlessly" to root out abuse and provide care for survivors.

In 2023, King Philippe, a Catholic, made a private visit to Rome to personally lobby the pope to visit the country in order to celebrate the 600th anniversary of the founding of the Catholic University of Leuven.

Although the pope will visit Leuven later today, along with its French counterpart tomorrow, the church's reckoning with abuse is expected to be felt throughout his Sept. 26-29 visit here, where Catholics are asking to have their names removed from baptism registries in record numbers.

When it came time for the pope to respond to both prime minister and the king, Francis said that abuse is a "scourge that the church is addressing firmly and decisively by listening to and accompanying those who have been wounded, and by implementing a prevention program throughout the world."

But speaking off the cuff, he added: "The church must be ashamed and ask for forgiveness and try to resolve this situation with Christian humility and put all the possibilities in place so that this doesn’t happen again."

"Even if it were only one [case], it is enough to be ashamed," said Francis.



Residents and staff at St. Joseph's Home in Brussels, a residence for the elderly run by the Little Sisters of the Poor, cheer and smile following a brief visit from Pope Francis Sept. 27. The pope earlier met with Queen Mathilde and King Philippe, and government and civic leaders. (CNS/Lola Gomez)

Earlier this year, the pope finally laicized former Bruges bishop, Roger Vangheluwe, who had admitted to sexually abusing his nephew 14 years ago. The late Cardinal Godfried Danneels of Belgium — a close friend of Francis — had pressured the bishop's nephew to keep silent on the matter, and until March 2024, Vangheluwe had faced no formal Vatican punishment.

During his stay here in Belgium, the pope is expected to meet privately with 15 abuse survivors, though victim advocates have already criticized the church for hand-picking who will be present for the much-anticipated encounter.

Ahead of that meeting, Lieve Halsberghe, a Belgian advocate for abuse survivors, told the National Catholic Reporter that she has witnessed too many meetings between the pope and victims that have yet to result in concrete responses.

"What do you do with words?" she asked. "It's actions that matter."

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