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Pope Francis presides over a penitential liturgy Oct. 1, 2024, in St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican on the eve of the opening of the second session of the Synod of Bishops on synodality. (CNS/Lola Gomez)

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The Catholic Church cannot be credible in its mission of proclaiming Christ unless it acknowledges its mistakes and bends down "to heal the wounds we have caused by our sins," Pope Francis said.

In an unusual penitential liturgy Oct. 1, the pope had seven cardinals read requests for forgiveness that he said he wrote himself "because it was necessary to call our main sins by name."

The sins included abuse, a lack of courage and commitment to peace, lack of respect for every human life, mistreatment of women or failure to acknowledge their talents and contributions, using church teaching as weapons to hurl at others, lack of concern for the poor and a failure to recognize the dignity and role of every baptized person in the church.

The penitential liturgy with Francis in St. Peter's Basilica concluded a two-day retreat for the 368 members of the Synod of Bishops on synodality, which was set to open with Mass in St. Peter's Square Oct. 2 and run through Oct. 27.

In what it believes and how it proclaims the faith, Francis said at the service, the church is "always relational, and only by healing sick relationships can we become a synodal church," one in which all members listen to each other and share responsibility for its mission.

Sin damages the essential relationships between an individual and God and among believers, he said. "Just as everything is connected in good, it is also connected in evil."

The liturgy included the testimonies of three witnesses to crime and sin: Laurence Gien, who as an 11-year-old boy in South Africa was raped by a priest; Sara Vatteroni, who works for the Italian bishops' conference in assisting migrants rescued from the Mediterranean Sea, accompanied by Solange, a migrant from the Ivory Coast; and Sister Deema Fayyad, a member of the Al-Khalil Monastic

Community in Syria, talking about the impact of war.

Gien told the pope and synod members, "The faces of the abused are too often blurred, hidden behind a veil of secrecy that the church, historically, has been complicit in maintaining. This anonymity serves to protect the perpetrators rather than the victims, making it harder for survivors to find justice and for communities to heal."

Retired Cardinal Seán P. O'Malley of Boston, former president of the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors, read the request for pardon of abuse.

"How much shame and pain I feel when considering especially the sexual abuse of minors and vulnerable people, abuses that have stolen innocence and profaned the sacredness of those who are weak and helpless," the cardinal said, reading the prayer written by the pope.

"I ask forgiveness, feeling shame, for all the times we have used the condition of ordained ministry and consecrated life to commit this terrible sin, feeling safe and protected while we were profiting diabolically from the little ones and the poor," he continued. "Forgive us, Lord."

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Cardinal Kevin J. Farrell, prefect of the Dicastery for Laity, the Family and Life, read the pope's prayer asking forgiveness, especially on behalf of men in the church, "for all the times that we have not recognized and defended the dignity of women" or silenced or exploited them, especially religious women.

Cardinal Víctor Manuel Fernández, prefect of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, read Pope Francis' prayer expressing "shame for all the times that in the church, especially us pastors who are entrusted with the task of confirming our brothers and sisters in the faith, have not been able to guard and propose the Gospel as a living source of eternal newness, (instead) 'indoctrinating it' and risking reducing it to a pile of dead stones to be thrown at others."

In his homily at the service, Francis said the synod could not "invoke God's name without asking for forgiveness from our brothers and sisters, from the Earth and all creatures."

"How could we be (a) synodal church without reconciliation?" the pope asked. "How could we claim to want to walk together without receiving and giving forgiveness, which restores communion in Christ?"

On the eve of the synod, he said, it is important for church members to confess in order to "restore trust in the church and toward her, a trust shattered by our mistakes and sins, and to begin to heal the wounds that do not stop bleeding, breaking 'the chains of wickedness.'"

Francis prayed that God would grant the church forgiveness.

"We ask forgiveness, feeling shame, from those who have been wounded by our sins," he said, asking God to "give us the courage of sincere repentance for genuine conversion."

And, turning to several dozen young people seated near him, Francis also asked forgiveness for all the times "we have not been credible witnesses" of faith.

This story appears in the **Synod on Synodality** feature series. View the full series.