News



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 penitential liturgy with Pope Francis in St. Peter's Basilica Oct. 1 opened with testimonies of those who have faced great suffering, among those a survivor of clergy sexual abuse. Laurence Gien, who was 11 when he was sexually abused by a priest in his native South Africa, told OSV News that standing in front of bishops, cardinals and Francis himself, giving testimony about his lifetime trauma, was his way of "just trying to appeal to their better selves."

The penitential liturgy concluded a two-day retreat for the 368 members of the Synod of Bishops on Synodality, which opened with Mass in St. Peter's Square Oct. 2 and will run through Oct. 27.

Gien is a successful musician, pursuing his career as a baritone and performing on stages across Europe. Based in Germany, he has sung at the Royal Opera House in Stockholm, the National Theater in Prague, the Istanbul Opera House, performing a wide repertoire and specializing in dramatic and iconic Giuseppe Verdi and Richard Wagner roles.

But the public appearance he made Oct. 1 in Rome was something entirely different. Gien started his testimony by recalling the grim reality of the abuse he experienced.

"Far from Rome, in a small town in Southern Africa, a predator honed in on me ... on a beautiful South African morning, he led me by the hand to a dark place where, in the screaming silence, he took from me what should never be taken from any child," Gien said.

He outlined that for survivors the effects of abuse are "long-lasting," and the "psychological toll often includes feelings of betrayal, shame, anxiety, depression."

He stressed that one of "the most heart-wrenching aspects of this issue is the anonymity that often surrounds it," and that "many survivors remain unnamed and unheard, their stories silenced by fear, stigma, or threats."

What he pointed out was the lack of transparency within the church: "For decades, accusations were ignored, covered up, or handled internally rather than reported to authorities," Gien said.

"This lack of accountability has not only allowed abusers to continue their behavior but has also eroded the trust that so many once placed in the institution," he said, as "Miserere Mei, Domine," "Have Mercy On Me, O Lord," followed, sang by the choir.

The pope had seven cardinals read requests for forgiveness Oct. 1, that the pope 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, 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.

Gien told OSV News that through his testimony at the St. Peter's liturgy, he "was just trying to appeal" to church hierarchy, "to look deep inside and to change what needs to be changed and to realize the fundamental values of certain things that you cannot take for granted. And that was important for me," he told OSV News.

But sharing his suffering publicly doesn't necessarily make things easier.

"Abuse is something that one just lives with. It doesn't get better. So maybe it's helped me to live with it a little bit better," Gien told OSV News. "But, you know, as someone who's been raped at 11 ... " he said, his sentence trailing off.

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Father Hans Zollner, Francis' point man on the clergy abuse crisis, who was one of the initiators of the penitential liturgy, said that it "was a very important moment," as it showed "that there is an awareness of the necessity to acknowledge what harm has been done to people" and "to really speak with clarity and without fussing around about what types of crimes and sins have been committed by clergy, by religious and by lay people in the church."

Zollner, the director of the Institute of Anthropology - Interdisciplinary Studies on Human Dignity and Care (IADC) in Rome, spoke to OSV News right after the liturgy

ended and pointed that "people lose trust" in the church not only "because of the abuse itself," but also "because of the inability, the resistance and the negligence," or "even worse," he said — "the cover up that has happened, through bishops, through provincials, through other church leaders, also laity, who didn't do what needed to be done at the moment so that the abuse was stopped and those who committed those crimes and sins were punished."

Zollner pointed out that "it is also a question of the compassion, of the empathy, of the closeness that the church leaders and the church members, all of us, show to victims of abuse because they need to to feel that they are not expelled again," but rather that the church "is engaged in reaching out to them and not waiting until they beg for some recognition or some reparation."

The expert stressed to OSV News the fact that the change of heart of church leaders and members regarding abuse is "very challenging for many within the church" is "surprising because you would think that from the Gospel, from Jesus's own identification with the most vulnerable and the wounded ones, we would have a natural inclination to be with and for those who have been wounded."

Zollner concluded, however, that he sees "some changes" and that it gives him hope.

"It is slow. It is not everywhere. But moments like these can be real moments of grace, where many people realize this is not going to go away," adding that "we want to be a safe church."

After his Vatican testimony, Gien said that he also sees the church "changing slowly."

"The fact that I can speak today is a wonderful thing. And also it does me good. It has helped me to be able to find compassion," he told OSV News.

When asked what he now hopes for from the church, Gien said: "to redefine itself in society and regain its position of moral guidance, because we definitely need it more than ever.

"The world needs spiritual leaders to help us forward," he said.

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