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Outgoing Australian Ambassador to the Holy See Chiara Porro speaks.

Outgoing Australian Ambassador to the Holy See Chiara Porro offers reflections on "Safeguarding and the Catholic Church" during a Nov. 21 lecture at the Pontifical Gregorian University. (Courtesy of Mirticeli Medeiros/Institute of Anthropology: Interdisciplinary Studies on Human Dignity and Care)



by Christopher White

Former Vatican Correspondent (2021-2025)

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Decades of clergy sex abuse scandals are an "existential threat" to the Catholic Church and can only be remedied through transparency and prioritizing survivors, according to the outgoing Australian ambassador to the Vatican.

"Clerical abuse has resulted in lost credibility, a mounting devotional crisis and, it would not be hyperbolic to say, a real existential threat for the Catholic Church," said Ambassador Chiara Porro.

The ambassador gave her remarks in a Nov. 21 lecture at the Pontifical Gregorian University. The event offered the Australian diplomat an occasion to offer public reflections on the theme of safeguarding, which had been one of her top priorities during her four-year posting here.

"Talking about child sexual abuse can be confronting and challenging. But as I have often said, it is absolutely indispensable, because child sexual abuse thrives on silence," she said. "Breaking that silence is a vital step to drive the society-wide effort we need to build a true culture of safety."

The event was co-sponsored by the Australian Embassy to the Holy See and the Gregorian University's Institute of Anthropology. In attendance was the Vatican's foreign minister, Archbishop Paul Gallagher; Cardinal Peter Turkson, chancellor of the Pontifical Academies of Sciences; and Cardinal Blase Cupich of Chicago, who served as a lead organizer of Pope Francis' 2019 summit on the protection of minors.

> 'Closed doors are re-traumatizing. Lengthy waits are re-traumatizing. Lack of justice is re-traumatizing.'
> —Chiara Porro
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The evening provided the rare occasion for a diplomat to offer a candid assessment of one of the greatest challenges facing the church, with both senior Vatican officials in attendance, along with representatives from leading abuse survivor advocate networks.

"The challenge for the church, as would be for any institution, is to demonstrate that words are followed by actions and that the extent and pace of reform matches the dimension and urgency of the problem," Porro said.

In her 30-minute speech, Porro reflected on the 2012-17 Australian Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse — one of the largest of its kind in the world — to examine key findings about abuse and best practices for reform.

"When things go wrong, institutions need to embark on a process of learning, leading to targeted improvements to ensure that failures are not repeated in the future," she observed. "We must acknowledge that institutions, indeed entire sectors, can get things badly wrong."

In particular, Porro challenged the familiar narrative that abuse is the result of a few "bad apples," instead of the result of serious structural problems.

"The key to accepting the dimension of the problem is acknowledging that there is a collective component to wrongful practices," she countered. "Large-scale, widespread, reiterated failures can never be solely attributable to individual misconduct. They are supported by organizational structures, hierarchies and power differences."

The ambassador dedicated a significant portion of her talk to advocating for greater transparency across institutions, including the church, particularly when it comes to the tendency to make decisions and conduct investigations entirely behind closed doors. Such behavior, she cautioned, only fuels distrust.

Individuals who lodge allegations of abuse, she said, deserve regular updates on the status of the investigation and consistent communication throughout the process.

In 2019, Francis initiated a major overhaul of how abuse cases and accusations of cover-ups are to be handled, including establishing a clear timeline for reviewing complaints. Even so, abuse survivors have continually complained about the lack of transparency surrounding their cases and that the mandated timelines are not being followed.

"If a complainant does not hear from investigators in weeks, months, years, the only possible conclusion they can reach is that nothing is happening," Porro observed.

Further, the ambassador encouraged a consideration about the level of visibility of how complaints against clergy are handled. She noted that in Australia, many tribunals against medical practitioners and police officers are held in public.

The experience of survivors, Porro went on to argue, must inform every aspect of education and reform efforts.

"Closed doors are re-traumatizing," she said. "Lengthy waits are re-traumatizing. Lack of justice is re-traumatizing."

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In his closing reflections, Jesuit Fr. Hans Zollner — a leading safeguarding expert and director of the Institute of Anthropology — praised Porro for her work in abuse prevention and awareness, as well as the thoroughness of the Australian Royal Commission's findings.

The Catholic Church in Australia, he noted, has been "challenged to own its past and present" and has made "great strides" in its reform efforts.

And the global church, said Zollner, now has "a lot to learn from Australia as an example of how to listen to survivors of clergy sexual abuse and how to bolster safeguarding efforts on a national and international level."

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