Vatican
Vatican News
Fr. Zollner greets victims.

Jesuit Fr. Hans Zollner, one of the Vatican's top experts on clergy sexual abuse, is pictured in a file photo greeting Andrew Collins, David Ridsdale and Peter Blenkiron at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome March 3, 2016. The three men said they were child sex abuse victims in Australia. (CNS/Reuters/Tony Gentile)



by Christopher White

Former Vatican Correspondent (2021-2025)

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Over the last decade, German Jesuit Fr. Hans Zollner has become recognized as one of the Catholic Church's leading experts in combatting clergy abuse.

Zollner, director of the Institute of Anthropology: Interdisciplinary Studies on Human Dignity and Care at the Pontifical Gregorian University, was one of the founding members of Pope Francis' Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors. He also was a lead organizer of Francis' historic 2019 summit on the Protection of Minors in the Church. His work as a respected psychologist and psychotherapist has taken him around the globe to promote best practices for safeguarding and rooting out clergy abuse.

In March 2023, Zollner resigned from Francis' child protection commission and criticized the organization's leadership, citing what he called a lack of transparency.

In an interview with the National Catholic Reporter, Zollner reflected on Francis' efforts to reform church laws on abuse and unfinished business he believes the cardinals should consider when electing the next pope.

***NCR*: Abuse failures have loomed over the last three papacies in different, but dramatic, ways. In your assessment, what steps forward were taken under Pope Francis and what were his failures?**

Zollner: Pope Francis has continued the line that Pope Benedict had drawn, from the time when he was prefect of the then-Congregation for Doctrine. Pope Francis expressed his concern about sexual abuse of minors by clergy very early on. The very fact that after one year into his papacy, he established the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors put the issue on the agenda of the leadership of the Holy See and of the church worldwide.

Through the new law *Vos Estis Lux Mund*i, the pope introduced far-reaching changes to church norms, e.g., in the area of accountability, the broadening of the attention given to other forms of abuse (especially spiritual abuse), the inclusion of non-clergy among those who can be punished in case of abuse or of negligence in dealing with cases, and the introduction of the term "vulnerable persons" to refer to adults.

Fr. Zollner

Jesuit Fr. Hans Zollner, director of the Pontifical Gregorian University's Institute of Anthropology': Interdisciplinary Studies on Human Dignity and Care, is pictured at the institute's headquarters in Rome in 2023. (CNS/Robert Duncan)

On many occasions, Francis met with survivors of abuse, demonstrating his closeness and understanding. His pontificate was of great help in this regard, contributing to the Catholic Church's identification of the problem and its subsequent efforts to take action in an area in which no one is without their imperfections. Questions have been raised about the consistency of application and about the sustainability of the measures that have been introduced, e.g., when it comes to negligence by church leaders and following due process as established by the new laws themselves.

When the cardinals meet for their general congregations (the closed-door meetings ahead of the conclave) what specifically should they be discussing when it comes to safeguarding?

No doubt only persons who have shown consistency when it comes to dealing with allegations of abuse and who are aware of the experiences and expectations of those who have been affected by abuse — victims, their families, their parishes or schools, etc. — will be seen as suitable and credible candidates for being elected as pope.

I think there needs to be a clear message from the cardinals and from the newly elected pope that the church is set to continue and strengthen what has been achieved so far in terms of working through the past and in investing in safeguarding measures, along the line that the church has established for itself: reliability in processes and procedures, transparency towards the public and all church members, taking responsibility personally and institutionally for what one has done or failed to do, i.e., effective accountability.

Pope Francis with Fr. Zollner

Pope Francis talks with Jesuit Fr. Hans Zollner as he arrives for the third day of the meeting on the protection of minors in the church at the Vatican Feb. 23, 2019. Zollner is now director of the Pontifical Gregorian University's Institute of Anthropology: Interdisciplinary Studies on Human Dignity and Care. (CNS/Paul Haring)

I believe these keywords, that came out of the Child Protection Summit in 2019, by now have been heard and accepted as directions by many bishops, other church leaders and the faithful, and they are prepared to take the next qualitative step in bringing about the change of mentality and attitudes that is necessary for the credibility of the message of the church.

The Catholic Church as the oldest and biggest single institution in the world has a special responsibility but also opportunity to implement safeguarding in all its activities and to make it an integral part of its spiritual, educational, charitable and liturgical ministries.

History shows: The Catholic church has far-sightedness. If we come along in understanding that safeguarding it is part and parcel of who we are as Catholics, then our voice and our commitment in many other areas will be much more effective.

How will the dynamics of cardinals coming from the Global North versus the Global South be noticeable on reckoning with safeguarding concerns?

From what I have seen worldwide, there is no divide between North and South — or, similarly, between conservative and liberal or between local bishops and Roman Curia — in this matter: In all countries and on all continents you have people who are highly motivated and deeply committed to safeguarding and to owning the failures of the past, and on all continents and in all countries you have those among leaders and faithful who — for different reasons — still do not apply what the church itself asks them to do and do not want to face reality.

This is all the more surprising given that a key element of self-understanding and ministry in the church is being available and a service for those who have been harmed, who are wounded and who are left alone. Of course, this applies also to those who have been harmed by church procedure and by church representatives. Moreover, wherever church leaders have taken responsibility, acknowledged their failures or the failures of their predecessors, asked for forgiveness, and started to act coherently in their meetings with survivors and in their safeguarding measures, trust is growing again.

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The next pope will presumably have to decide whether to reauthorize the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors, which you served as a founding member. What would you advise him to consider in regards to this?

I believe there is a lot to do for the Pontifical Commission when it comes to offering a reliable, professional and compassionate response to the many victims who still cannot find a way to tell their stories, voice their concerns and ask for support. I get so many messages from survivors of abuse who do not know to whom to turn.

Secondly, another area that needs much more concentration of resources and competencies is the writing and implementation of guidelines, safety concepts and safeguarding training according to the different contexts. The commission could be the facilitator of networking and of effective interchange between bishops' conferences, dioceses, religious congregations, etc.

Thirdly, the commission needs to have teeth when it comes to dealing with other Holy See offices as well as with other church entities. We are not yet at the stage of an effective auditing capacity, but at least a critical eye and the candid voice is called for when it comes to describing the realistic situation behind the beautiful words in many reports and planning out the next steps.

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This story appears in the **Who will be the next pope?** feature series. View the full series.