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Analysis

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Paola Ugaz, a Peruvian journalist who helped expose the abuse committed by leaders of the Sodalitium Christianae Vitae, gives Pope Leo XIV a stole made of alpaca wool, during the pope's meeting with members of the media May 12, 2025, in the Paul VI Audience Hall at the Vatican. (CNS/Vatican Media)

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One issue any pope would have to face when elected to govern the Catholic Church in 2025 is that of continuing to address the clergy sexual abuse crisis. With Cardinal Seán O'Malley, president of the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors, among the first prelates that Pope Leo XIV received in audience as pope May 14, it's fair to say that the sexual abuse crisis so far seems high on his priority list.

In the first week of Leo pontificate, the leading expert on the abuse crisis — as well as several survivors and victims of abuse — has come to the defense of the newly elected Roman pontiff after two organizations advocating for victims of abuse raised concerns regarding Cardinal Robert Francis Prevost's record on the matter not long after he was elected.

Jesuit Fr. Hans Zollner, director of the Institute of Anthropology (IADC) at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome, and a top expert on the abuse crisis, first met then-Father Prevost when Prevost was serving as prior general — the chief authority — of the Order of St. Augustine in Rome. At that time, the future pontiff participated in the inauguration of the Centre for Child Protection (now IADC) as well as a safeguarding summit at the Gregorian.

"Together with a number of other superior generals, he was representing the male Major Superiors. And this in itself was already a sign that he, at that time in 2012, was very much aware of the issue of child sexual abuse," Zollner told OSV News in a recent interview, adding that Prevost "was willing to learn more — both in terms of safeguarding and in terms of canonical procedures."

Eight years later, in early 2020, their paths crossed again, when Zollner was invited by the Peruvian Episcopal Conference to deliver a workshop on safeguarding to both the bishops and at the Pontifical Catholic University in Lima. At this time, then-Bishop Prevost was the vice president of the conference.

Zollner told OSV News he welcomed Leo's election, noting that his experience as a missionary in Peru, as a bishop and as the head of the powerful Dicastery for Bishops in the church's central government, were among the many experiences that "are vital for what we need now in terms of church leadership, when it comes to passing on the faith in a challenging environment."

He also noted that, with his expertise in canon law, Leo can bring a balanced approach to the issue of clergy sexual abuse because "focusing only on a canonical approach does not suffice if you want to really get the church moving on a global level — especially when it comes to change of mentality and change of attitude."

While meeting with several journalists May 12 during an audience with those who had been covering the papal transition, Leo encountered Peruvian journalist Paola Ugaz, who beamed from ear to ear as the pope shook her hand. As she handed him a stole made from alpaca wool — which he placed over his shoulders briefly — and

Peruvian chocolates, the two shared a few words.

"The gifts I gave him I had originally brought for my friend, Cardinal Prevost, who along the way became the pope," she told OSV News later, with a smile.

For Ugaz, this wasn't just a happy meeting with the new pontiff, but rather a surprising reunion with someone who had been among the few who had supported her during a decadeslong persecution as she and survivors of abuse sought to expose wrongdoing within a controversial movement in her country.

Prevost "had supported us quietly — not in front of the cameras — since 2018," she said. "He never did it for recognition. He just helped. He was always there."

In 2015, Ugaz, along with survivor and fellow journalist Pedro Salinas, co-wrote a book titled "Mitad Monjes, Mitad Soldados" ("Half Monks, Half Soldiers"), which detailed the alleged psychological and sexual abuse, as well as corporal punishment and extreme exercises, that young members of Sodalitium Christianae Vitae, a society of apostolic life founded in Peru in 1971, were forced to endure from others in the community, including leadership.

Since 2018, Ugaz and Salinas have faced a smear campaign they attributed to Sodalitium, which included lawsuits and the publication of materials intended to discredit their work.

Given the movement's continued attempts to silence victims, as well as its questionable financial practices in Peru, Francis launched an investigation into Sodalitium in July 2023 and sent in Maltese Archbishop Charles Scicluna, adjunct secretary of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, and Spanish Msgr. Jordi Bertomeu, also of that department.

The investigation resulted in the expulsion of several high-profile members of the movement, including Archbishop José Antonio Eguren of Piura, as well as its subsequent suppression by Francis in January 2025, just a few months before his April 21 death.

Recalling the moment Leo was announced as the 266th successor of St. Peter, Ugaz told OSV News that the news "hit me like a ton of bricks."

"It was beautiful," she said. "I don’t know if he was seeking it, but for survivors, it’s a deeply symbolic message."

Ugaz said that during his time leading the Diocese of Chiclayo, Prevost was among a handful of bishops in the country who stood by her and Salinas, as well as with the victims of Sodalitium, as the group used questionable and unethical methods to silence them.

While "in Peru, abusers and the powerful usually get away with it," Ugaz said that in her particular case, justice came from outside, "not because the country suddenly realized the Sodalitium had abused its members, stolen land from farmers, and had gone after journalists. No. Justice came thanks to the church, not the courts."

Not long after the announcement of the May 8 election of Leo, the Survivors Network of those Abused By Priests (SNAP) issued a statement accusing the new pope of failing to act against abuse in two separate cases: one in Chicago, when he served as the Augustinian provincial in 2000; the other in Chiclayo in 2022, when he served as bishop of the diocese.

In Chicago, the group said, Prevost allowed Fr. James Ray, a priest under restricted ministry in 1991 after being accused of abusing minors, "to live at the Augustinians' St. John Stone Friary in 2000, despite its proximity to a Catholic elementary school."

On May 9, Crux reported that an Augustinian from Chicago said "on background earlier this year that the archdiocese had asked the order for permission for Fr. James Ray to be placed in that house after being removed from ministry because its superior was a licensed counselor who served as supervisor of a safety plan imposed on Ray, and therefore Ray would be under a more watchful eye."

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In her report, Elise Allen wrote: "The Augustinian said the location of a school two blocks away was not considered a risk at the time, given that a safety plan was in place, and the criteria of not placing accused priests near schools was a product of the 2002 Dallas Charter, which had not yet been issued when the decision on Ray was made. This decision, they said, was an agreement between the archdiocese and the superior of the friary, but which Prevost had to formally sign off on, since it was an Augustinian community house."

The Archdiocese of Chicago has yet to respond to the recent allegations stemming from the 2000 incident.

As bishop of Chiclayo, SNAP accused the newly elected pope of failing to open an investigation and sending "inadequate information to Rome" in the abuse case of three women. The group alleged that the priest was allowed to continue his ministry despite the accusations.

SNAP said it filed a complaint against Prevost "under Pope Francis' 2023 decree Vos estis lux mundi on March 25, 2025."

The Diocese of Chiclayo denied the accusations made by SNAP, saying that Prevost met with the victims in April 2022, and subsequently removed the accused priest, suspended him from ministry and forwarded the results of the investigation to the Vatican.

"Every media outlet has been trying to discredit the cardinal, claiming he did nothing. That's a lie. He has listened, he has respected the proceedings, and this process is still ongoing," Bishop Edinson Farfán of Chiclayo said at a press conference in a town where Leo was bishop, the Madrid-based news agency EFE reported May 10.

When asked about the accusations made by SNAP against Leo, Ugaz said that while the victims' stories of abuse are undeniable, the allegations of inaction were part of a smear campaign orchestrated by Sodalitium members who wished to discredit the former bishop after he stood by the movement's victims.

Zollner also suggested that the "allegations against then-Bishop Prevost were part of the campaign instigated by members of Sodalitium."

"I have not seen any convincing proof or documentation that SNAP or (watchdog website) BishopAccountability or whoever produced in support of the allegations," Zollner told OSV News.

The accusations regarding the Chiclayo case were reported Sept. 8, 2024 by the television news program Cuarto Poder, capturing attention in Peru and abroad.

"What the Cuarto Poder program affirmed — that Cardinal Robert Prevost covered up for the priest, Eleuterio Vásquez González, and that he remained silent in face of the complaints — is not true," the diocesan statement said at the time.

"From the moment of the reception of the complaint, and maintaining the right to the presumption of innocence, the church has proceeded according to its guidelines,

both in the preliminary investigation, and in the the application of the precautionary measures: removal from the parish and the prohibition of public exercise of the priestly ministry."

The diocese also asked Cuarto Poder to "rectify" its report, adding, "It is not true that the Catholic Church has turned its back on the alleged victims. On the contrary, they were left free to file complaints in the civil courts and were offered the necessary psychological help if they required it."

The Cuarto Poder investigation focused on the accusations of three women, who alleged inappropriate touching by Vásquez as young girls.

The alleged victims issued a statement on Sept. 11, 2024 in which they contradict the diocesan statement and say that in fact, after reporting the story to Prevost on April 5, 2022 — until November 2023, when one of them went public on social media — "no investigation was carried out, nor were the precautionary measures for the protection of the faithful, boys and girls (undertaken) … the case was filed and archived," they said.

In their Sept. 11 statement, the alleged victims published several images of the accused priest, Vásquez, celebrating Masses in public spaces on important occasions such as Easter, despite the restrictions the diocese claimed in its Sept. 10 statement were in place.

In its Sept. 10 statement the Diocese of Chiclayo said however that "the case was sent to the Holy See and archived for lack of evidence. Then, upon public appeal by one of the complainants, the case was reopened, investigated again, and is currently underway in the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith. It should be added that, although it was publicly stated that there would be more alleged victims, only two of the three who initially denounced went to testify."

OSV News has sought confirmation of this, as well as the dicastery's response, with its prefect, Cardinal Victor Manuel Fernandez. As of press time, there had been no response.

Those who worked with Prevost also contradict the allegations. "Roberto (now-Pope Leo), when these allegations occurred, knew how to act immediately," César Piscoya, former executive secretary of the pastoral vicariate under Prevost in the Diocese of Chiclayo, told OSV News May 12.

Piscoya explained that the then-bishop addressed the canonical aspects of the complaint, adding, "When there had to be a complaint in a civil context, he also promoted it."

Piscoya worked alongside future Pope Leo XIV in Chiclayo from February 2015 until December 2022.

"Unfortunately, there are detractors. Unfortunately, there are people with bad intentions," he said. "But when you identify who writes and who publishes this, we find that they are precisely the ones who were accused themselves."

The Peruvian bishops' conference barred a canon lawyer, Fr. Ricardo Coronado Arrascue, from representing victims in August 2024. In December of that year, a decree issued by the Dicastery for Clergy and seen by OSV News confirmed the priest had been laicized for sins against the Sixth Commandment, which include sexual sins that cause scandal and forcing "someone to perform or submit to sexual acts."

Zollner said that in light of Francis' summit to address clerical sexual abuse in February 2019, it is crucial that Leo "promotes awareness about the necessity to engage and continue engaging in safeguarding measures," especially regarding the three pillars of tackling abuse: compliance, transparency and accountability.

One of the most urgent cases on the table for the new pope to handle in canonical terms is the case of Slovenian priest-artist Fr. Marko Rupnik, who was expelled from the Jesuit order in June 2023.

"I do hope that, as soon as possible, we will have a verdict. Many of us are looking forward to hearing about that, because it has been a very long time, especially for those who have brought forward the allegations — so that finally there will be clarity about this," Zollner said.

For any pope, he added, the issue of abuse is critical, as it becomes "a question of the credibility of our existence and our message."

"The message of Jesus Christ (is) that we have to be there for our brother and sister, and especially those who are wounded and are in danger of being wounded," Zollner said. "This is the core of Christian existence."

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This story appears in the **Looking for Leo in History** and **Pope Leo XIV** feature series.