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Pope Leo XIV leads a meditation with the participants into the Jubilee of Bishops inside St. Peter's Basilica, at the Vatican, Wednesday, June 25, 2025. (AP/Andrew Medichini)

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Pope Leo XIV affirmed Wednesday that priests must be celibate and insisted that bishops take "firm and decisive" action to deal with sex abusers, as he gave marching orders Wednesday to the world's Catholic hierarchs.

Leo met in St. Peter's Basilica with about 400 bishops and cardinals from 38 countries attending this week's special Holy Year celebrations for clergy. A day after he gave an uplifting message of encouragement to young seminarians, Leo offered a more comprehensive outline of what bishops must do to lead their flocks.

It's an issue the former Cardinal Robert Prevost would have long pondered given his role as the prefect of the Vatican Dicastery for Bishops. In that job from 2023 until his election in May, the Chicago-born Prevost vetted bishop nominations for Pope Francis, identifying the type of leader who would further Francis' view of a church where all are welcome and dialogue is the decisive form of governance.

History's first American pope reaffirmed Wednesday that the primary role of bishops is to forge unity in his diocese among clergy and to be close to his flock in word and deed. Bishops must live in poverty and simplicity, generously opening their homes to all and acting as a father figure and brother to his priests, Leo said.

"In his personal life, he must be detached from the pursuit of wealth and from forms of favoritism based on money or power," he said.

Bishops must remain celibate "and present to all the authentic image of the church, holy and chaste in her members as in her head," he said.

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Referring to cases of abuse, he said bishops "must be firm and decisive in dealing with situations that can cause scandal and with every case of abuse, especially involving minors, and fully respect the legislation currently in force."

It was the second time in a week that Leo has commented publicly on the abuse scandal. On Friday night, in a written statement to a crusading Peruvian journalist who documented gross abuses in a Peruvian Catholic movement, Leo said there

should be no tolerance in the Catholic Church for any type of abuse. He identified sexual and spiritual abuses, as well as abuses of authority and power in calling for "transparent processes" to create a culture of prevention across the church.

Francis, who in many ways placed Leo in position to succeed him, had also reaffirmed celibacy for Latin rite priests while acknowledging it was a discipline of the church, not doctrine, and therefore could change. But he refused appeals from Amazonian bishops to allow married priests to address the priest shortage in the region.

Prevost spent two decades as a missionary and bishop in Peru and would know well those arguments. But on Wednesday he reaffirmed the celibate priesthood as the "authentic image" of the church.

This story appears in the **Pope Leo XIV** feature series. View the full series.