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Vatican abuse summit: Penance and a spirit of 'Never Again!'

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NCR Today

ROME -- In a first of its kind for Rome, the Vatican's top official for bishops tonight led a liturgy of penance to ask forgiveness for the sexual abuse of children by priests, and for church leaders who covered up that abuse.

The service included an Irish victim of clerical abuse, who, in an apparent reference both to abusers and their protectors, asked God to "forgive them."

Held tonight at Rome's Church of St. Ignatius, the liturgy was presided over by Canadian Cardinal Marc Ouellet, who serves as Prefect of the Vatican's Congregation for Bishops. His participation was seen as significant, because it implicitly acknowledged that the church's shortcomings are not limited to priests who committed abuse, but also include bishops who failed to act.

The service was part of a four-day Vatican summit on the sexual abuse crisis titled "Towards Healing and Renewal." The event brings together roughly 100 bishops and religious superiors from around the world, ahead of a May deadline for bishops' conferences to submit their policies on fighting abuse for Vatican review.

In his reflections during the liturgy, Ouellet called the crisis "a source of great shame and enormous scandal," saying that sexual abuse is not only a "crime" but also an "authentic experience of death for the innocent victims."

The first step towards healing, Ouellet said, is to "listen carefully" to victims and "to believe their painful stories."

tBeyond listening, he said, the church must "establish the proper structures to help prevent similar crimes," which Ouellet said must be based on the sentiment of "Never again!"

tOuellet said that in many instances, abusers in the clergy should have been identified and removed much earlier, but instead were left in place.

t"Once again, we apologize to the victims," he said, for their "terrible and humiliating experience."

tTonight's hour-long liturgy began with a slide show in the darkened Church of St. Ignatius, chosen because it's a major Jesuit church in Rome and the four-day summit is being held at the Jesuit-run Gregorian University. The slide show featured images symbolizing themes of creation, sin, and redemption.

tAt one stage, representatives of various groups in the church read prayers asking God for forgiveness, including bishops, educators, religious superiors, priests, parents, and the faithful. The bishop said, "Here we are humbled before you, and before all of humanity, crucified by the evil that has disfigured the face of your church."

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Irish abuse victim Marie Collins, who spoke this morning at the symposium, then read a prayer on behalf of victims. The text of her prayer was:

*Lord, as one acquainted with great sorrows,
you know how difficult it is for us to forgive
those who have done us evil and
only your love can open ourselves to this gift:
we ask you for the strength to unite us to
the forgiveness that, from the cross, you made descend
upon sinful humanity as a healing balm,
so that also thy Church may be healed by our forgiveness.
"Forgive them."*

tThough liturgies of penance with victims of abuse have been conducted by bishops and other church leaders in other parts of the world, this was apparently the first time such a service was conducted in Rome by senior Vatican officials.

tIn his six meetings with victims of sexual abuse so far, Pope Benedict XVI has taken part in private prayers of penance, but has not yet led any such public liturgy.

tBack in 2002 amid the spiraling American scandals, then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, today Pope Benedict, endorsed such liturgies of penance.

"Such a public act takes note of the reality of sin and invites us to think about sin and mercy," Ratzinger said at the time. "Above all, it can promote a praxis of penitence, focusing on both education and prevention against these human failings."

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