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Editorial: Francis, you must meet victims of clergy abuse

by NCR Editorial Staff

Editorial

The editors of NCR offer this open letter to Pope Francis:

Dear Pope Francis,

Warmest greetings from the heartland of the United States.

We, like so many others, are taken with your very human and pastoral approach to life's difficult issues, with your deep compassion that you don't hesitate to demonstrate and with your insistent exhortation to move out of our comfortable churches and go encounter the rest of humanity, especially those on the margins.

You have become an inspiring and challenging example of genuine humility and authority.

You must feel that the entire world is tugging at your sleeve with endless expectations. So it is only out of a sense of extreme urgency that we seek to intrude on your busy schedule and raise the issue of the sex abuse crisis. In a recent response to an inquiry, you acknowledged that the abuse is awful because it leaves "profound wounds."

Then, you added: "The statistics of the phenomenon of violence against children are staggering, but show clearly that the vast majority of abuse happens in the family setting and neighborhood.

"The Catholic church is maybe the only public institution to have moved with transparency and responsibility. No one else has done more. Yet the church is the only one to be attacked."

Those statements contain a certain truth, but they also conceal the more difficult truths that have been

embedded in this story since *NCR* began covering this awful chapter of church history in 1985. We claim a certain authority in addressing the issue because we have been investigating and analyzing the scandal for so long. Countless times we have heard the defense that most abuse of children occurs outside the church and that the church has done more than any other institution to become transparent and aggressive in preventing abuse.

The other side of that truth, Your Holiness, is that no other institution on earth had the means or the will to hide as much crime and sin for so long. The reality is that while the incidents of abuse of children are horrific, the larger and more persistent scandal is how many bishops and cardinals hid the sin, paid victims enormous sums of money to stay silent and refused to tell even their fellow bishops and priests of potential problems when they transferred troubled priests.

The church has done probably more than any other institution to institute norms and procedures for preventing abuse in the future. But the other side of that truth is that for decades, church leaders denied that there was any problem, they lied about the numbers of people involved and fought, at enormous expense, disclosure of the dimensions of the problem. Not one of them has yet been held to account. Today there are bishops in place who have betrayed their own conferences' directions on how to handle abuse cases. If the church is doing more now than any other institution to protect children it is only because of enormous public pressure brought about by victims and others within the church demanding the truth. And the record shows that church leaders can be less than diligent in applying the new standards.

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You appeal to us to go to the margins and you have given us examples yourself of what you mean. You have also placed a high value on dialogue, and it is in that spirit that we suggest that among the most marginalized in the church are those who have been abused by priests.

You speak of the 'profound wounds' caused in ordinary families by abuse. Those families, we know, will never be whole. Parents and children will never experience the normal depth of love and trust that healthy family life provides.

In the same way, the wounds persist in the church, perhaps even more profoundly and damaging than in other circumstances because the abuse came at the hands of someone who was supposed to represent the deepest spiritual good the community has to offer.

You understandably have little responsibility for what goes on in the wider society, but within the Catholic family you certainly know by now that your example can set powerful precedents. Of all the margins in the world that need attending, none needs your attention more immediately than those whose lives have been shattered by abusive priests.

You called Pope Benedict XVI 'courageous' for opening a way for the church to address the sex abuse crisis. Benedict found that courage after he was confronted with what he called 'the filth in the church' as he read weekly through the files of priest abusers whose cases came before him as prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. As pope, furthermore, Benedict met personally with victims of clergy sex abuse. He heard their stories and knew their pain.

Pope Francis, we urge you to meet with victims of clergy sex abuse.

Last year on Holy Thursday, you shook up and inspired the world by attending to and washing the feet of

young prisoners in Rome.

We implore you to turn the world's focus this Holy Thursday on a healing service for victims of sexual abuse by priests. Listen to their stories. Wash their feet.

Unless this deep wound is attended to in a loving and understanding way ? unless the world's pastor is able to attend compassionately to this horrible injustice within his own family ? the wound will only continue to fester and dwarf all the other pastoral and institutional reforms you have initiated.

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