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When Pope Francis was elected in 2013, he became the leader of a Church with a long history of clergy sexual misconduct, with an unresolved abuse scandal, with thousands of victims in need of help, with millions of disillusioned Catholics, with priests ill-equipped to deal with the pressures of pastoral ministry, with bishops who avoided accountability for failed oversight, and with recent popes who made only limited progress in solving the crisis.

About a year after his election, Francis, already under attack for inaction, established the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors, with the task of proposing to the pope “the most opportune initiatives” to protect minors and vulnerable adults so that crimes of sexual abuse “are no longer repeated in the Church.” Although the Commission, led by Cardinal Sean O’Malley, archbishop of Boston, worked with almost 200 dioceses and religious communities worldwide to raise awareness of the problem of sex abuse, it has not really been an effective instrument for reform. The members soon realized that raising awareness was not sufficient and that the church had to deal with complicit bishops who reassigned abusive priests. This led to the decision of Pope Francis to create a new tribunal to judge bishops accused of covering up for priest predators. Unfortunately, the Vatican bureaucracy was not able to solve many legal problems, and in 2016 Francis officially dropped the plan, leaving it to existing procedures to deal with complicit bishops.

Of the 17 Commission members two were abuse survivors, Peter Saunders, who was ousted in 2016 for criticizing the Commission and Marie Collins, a native of Ireland with experience as a victim and advocate, who resigned over the ineffectiveness of the Commission. In an article published in the March, 2017, *National Catholic Reporter,* she stated: “The most significant problem has been reluctance of some members of the Vatican Curia to implement the recommendations of the Commission despite their approval by the pope.” Collins went on to list a number of specific stumbling blocks: lack of adequate funding during the first year; difficulties in communicating with various Curial offices; the failure of the CDF to set up the Tribunal for bishops’ accountability proposed by Francis; the reluctance of some in the Curia to cooperate with the Commission; and the “last straw” for Collins, the refusal of the Curia to implement the simple recommendation, approved by the pope, to ensure that all substantiated complaints from victims receive a response. Although Collins, who felt a moral obligation to resign to retain her integrity, believes “the pope does at heart understand the horror of abuse and the need for those who would hurt minors to be stopped,” she urged him to take action by giving the Commission more power to oversee implementation of its recommendations. Marie Collins leaves us with the impression of a pope dedicated to dealing constructively and comprehensibly with the sex abuse scandal, but thwarted by an entrenched, self-serving Curia, which he has not been able to control.

Critics of Francis challenge this benign assessment of Francis in various ways: he did not have a scheduled meeting with victims when he visited the United States; he delayed establishing the Commission for a whole year after his election; he did not invest the necessary time or energy in gaining the cooperation of the Curia; he allowed the funeral of Cardinal Law to be held in St. Peter’s Basilica; he did not meet personally with Marie Collins; and he let the Commission’s three year mandate expire in December of 2017, while waiting until February 2018 to reestablish it.

Supporters of Francis as well as his opponents severely criticized his initial response to the sex abuse situation in Chile. A May 2, 2018, Associated Press article presented a helpful timeline of events: January 10, 2015, Francis appointed Juan Barros as bishop of Osorno over the objections of the Chilean bishops concerned about his complicity in the abuse committed by the notorious priest predator Fernando Karadima; January 31, 2015, Francis wrote a letter acknowledging the concerns of the Chilean bishops but rejecting their plea to have Barros resign because, as Francis later said, there was no evidence of his involvement in a cover-up; February 2015; over a thousand Chilean Catholics in the Osorno diocese, lawmakers, priests and lay persons, signed a petition urging Francis to revoke the Barros appointment; March 21, 2015, Barros was installed as bishop of Osorno in a Mass marked by violent protests; April 12, 2015, Juan Carlos Cruz wrote a letter accusing Barros of witnessing the sex abuse inflicted on him by Fr. Karadima, which was hand delivered from Marie Collins to Cardinal O’Malley, who personally gave it to Pope Francis; May 15, 2015, Francis told a spokesperson for the Chilean bishops that the opposition to Barros comes from leftists who speak “nonsense” about him; January 15, 2018, Francis arrived in Chile, was greeted by unprecedented protests, apologized for the “irreparable damage” suffered by sex abuse victims and held two tearful meetings with survivors; January 18, 2018, Francis responded to a journalist that there is “not one shred of proof” against Barros and it is all calumny; January 20, 2018, Cardinal O’Malley publicly rebuked the pope, saying his comments about calumny “were a source of great pain” for abuse survivors; January 21, 2018, while flying back to Rome, Francis repeated his charge of calumny, his claim that no victim has come forward with proof, and his conviction that Barros is innocent.

On January 30, 2018, the Vatican appointed Archbishop Charles Scicluna is to investigate the Chilean situation; February 5, 2018, Cruz released his previous letter to the pope, decrying not only the abuse he suffered but also his subsequent “terrible mistreatment” by pastors; February 17, 2018, Archbishop Scicluna met with Cruz for three hours in New York and then flew to Chile, where he took testimony from more than 60 witnesses; April 11, 2018, Francis releases a letter to the Chilean bishops admitting he made “serious errors in judgment,” apologizing to victims and inviting them to come to Rome so he can beg their forgiveness in person; April 27, 2018, the pope began days of meetings with Cruz and other survivors, James Hamilton and Jose Andres Murillo; May 2, 2018, at the end of the meetings, Cruz and the others said they accepted the pope’s apology and urged him to take concrete action to end the “epidemic of abuse and cover-ups.” In an interview after the meetings, Juan Carlos Cruz said he was convinced the pope was misinformed about the situation in Chile. He also noted the pope’s sincerity: “I have never seen someone be so contrite about what he was telling me,” adding his remembrance of Francis admitting: ”I was part of the problem. I caused this and I am sorry.”

Since his meeting with Cruz, Francis has taken steps to turn his verbal apology into constructive action. He met with more Chilean victims, including five priests. He spent three days in prayer and discussion with 34 Chilean bishops, who almost all submitted their resignation. Subsequently, the pope accepted three of the resignations, including that of Osorno Bishop Juan Barros, an appointee of Francis, who has been at the center of the scandal. Francis, who now speaks of a “culture of abuse and cover-up,” appointed temporary leaders for each of those vacant diocese and sent Archbishop Sciclona and a colleague to lead a healing mission to Osorno. Juan Carlos Cruz applauded these moves:” A new day has begun in Chile’s Catholic Church,” adding that the “band of delinquent bishops“ has begun ”to disintegrate today.” Other critics see it as a positive step with much more to be done to restore the credibility of the Church in Chile. Meanwhile new scandals have been reported in the Diocese of Rancagua where 14 priests have been suspended for allegedly being part of a “gay sex ring,” and their bishop has admitted he was slow to act on accusations of the abuse of a minor.

Clergy sex abuse is a worldwide scandal. There have already been cases reported in African and Asian countries and we can anticipate more allegations as victims gain courage to come forward. The problem has systemic aspects that require institutional responses by the church. Francis, who cannot intervene personally in every country as he did in Chile, must establish church structures that deal effectively with the problem long after he is gone. It will help if he can overcome the objections of the Vatican Curia and put in place a papal tribunal to try complicit bishops. Francis has already made an extremely valuable contribution by the way he eventually handled the crisis in Chile: humbly admitting his mistakes and apologizing for them; personally meeting with individual survivors; prayerfully interacting with all the Chilean bishops; and decisively replacing the bishop he mistakenly appointed. Now Pope Francis has the great challenge of developing institutional structures to manage what promises to be an expanding worldwide scandal.

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