



DICASTERY FOR LAITY, FAMILY AND LIFE

Annual Meeting
“Prevention of sexual abuse:
the Commitment of the Associations and Ecclesial Movements”.

General Congregation of the Jesuits, 13th June 2019

Address by Cardinal Kevin Farrell, Prefect

Good Morning!

It is my pleasure to welcome you to this Annual Meeting of the international associations and ecclesial movements.

This is now a traditional event that gives us the opportunity to forge closer links of ecclesial communion between associations, ecclesial movements, new communities and the Dicastery for Laity, Family and Life: the Dicastery of the Holy See that has erected or recognized you and that, as established by our Statutes (see Article 7 § 1), accompanies each one of you as an ecclesial reality incarnating a specific gift, given by the Spirit to His Church.

1. The theme of today’s meeting – dedicated to the commitment by the associations and ecclesial movements for preventing sexual abuse – takes up a challenge that the Church and civil society, everywhere in the world, have to face. Moreover, with this theme, the Dicastery is the interpreter of the concern and urgency with which the Holy Father, Pope Francis, asks us to act, in all social and ecclesial contexts, coming out into the open, looking reality in the face in an honest way, calling it by its name with complete frankness, proceeding with the necessary purification and setting up adequate prevention.

Dealing with sexual abuse is not this Pope’s or our fixation, it is not a fashionable trend at this point of time. Some people think that it is an unhealthy insistence, an irritating exaggeration that can obscure and put into second place the priorities in the pastoral plans we have prepared, overshadowing the good the Church is doing.

Perhaps, in our inner thoughts, we are thinking that too.

In truth, this logic must be reversed: it is sexual abuse, abuse of power, abuse of conscience that is an evil, an unhealthy mania, a true and proper manipulation that suffocates and undermines even the best pastoral plans, overshadowing the good that the Church is doing.

As Pope Benedict XVI wrote with heartfelt concern in his *Pastoral Letter to the Catholics of Ireland* on 19th March 2010: “We must act decisively to deal with these factors that have had such tragic consequences on the life of the victims and their families and have obscured the light of the Gospel to a point that not even centuries of persecution had done.”

This urgency not only remains today, nine years after that Letter, but has amplified, owing to the expansion of the problem, the extent of which still cannot be quantified precisely but the gravity of which, today, we have much more awareness.

2. Sexual abuse is a plague, a crime that has historically been a widespread phenomenon across all cultures and society. It is only by coming to grips with this phenomenon and studying it that we can create a change in mentality and awareness in public opinion. Nevertheless, until only a short while ago it was considered a taboo and even today it still is for many people, for many Catholics, men and women of the Church.

I hope that this is not so amongst us.

Precisely because sexual abuse in the Church has been considered a taboo-theme, this has meant that many people knew of its existence but no-one talked about it, at that time with the conviction that, in this way, the good name of priests, consecrated persons, bishops, the Pope, the entire Church and all its institutions would be preserved, thus avoiding scandal for the faithful. On the contrary, in this way a double abuse occurred: silence, in fact, a silence was added to the abuses committed that inevitably became an accomplice to these crimes and allowed them to multiply undisturbed.

Owing to this silence, the statistical data do not represent the entire reality, and do not show us the real extent of the phenomenon, often underestimated because so many cases of abuse against minors or vulnerable adults have not been reported. The experience of the Holy See and that of our Dicastery has taught us that the cases emerging are only the tip of an iceberg.

At the time of the Irish Bishops' *Ad Limina Visit* to Rome in October 2006, Benedict XVI used words that are still extremely valid for the whole Church and for us who are meeting here today: “In your continuous efforts to deal efficiently with this problem, it is important to establish the truth of what has happened in the past, take all the appropriate measures to avoid it being repeated in the future and, above all, heal the victims and all those who have suffered from these

abnormal crimes”. And, in order to avoid any misguided approach, he added: “In this way the Church in Ireland will be reinforced and will always be capable of giving witness to the redeeming strength of Christ’s Cross”.

Contrary to what we may think, the Church will be strengthened, not weakened.

3. During the past months, above all owing to various magisterial and canonical initiatives promoted by the Holy Father, especially the extraordinary convocation of the world meeting held in the Vatican last February, we have often heard talk about sexual abuse in the Church, statistics and testimonies have been diffused, there is an internet site that publishes papers and conferences. Therefore, we are now probably more used to the matter and we know more about this phenomenon.

But behind this phenomenon that is expressed in numbers and abusive relational dynamics there are people. The phenomenon can be contained in diagrams, tables, Power Point presentations... but the people involved, the victims and their abusers, have a name and surname, a face, a personal and family history, a social and ecclesial experience, they have wounds imprinted in their minds, their hearts, their flesh. Behind the numbers: people! Let us not forget this!

Today we are meeting as people concerned by the task that the Church, and the Holy Father Pope Francis, has given us: “The extent and the gravity of all that has happened requires coming to grips with this reality in a comprehensive and communal way. While it is important and necessary on every journey of conversion to acknowledge the truth of what has happened, this is not enough. Today we are challenged as the People of God to take on the pain of our brothers and sisters wounded in their flesh and in their spirit [...] it is necessary that each one of the baptized should feel involved in the ecclesial and social change that we so greatly need. This change calls for a personal and community-wide conversion that makes us see things as the Lord does” (*Letter to the People of God*, 20th August 2018).

4. All of you here today representing associations, ecclesial movements, new communities, are responsible, co-responsible, as an ecclesial body, and even before that as citizens who are part of the social fabric in which we live. You are protagonists of this necessary conversion that does not divert our attention but comes to grips with and prevents these serious crimes of sexual abuse.

In your apostolate, from which we cannot separate the apostolate within your associations, you have great potential in the matter of prevention:

- above all it is necessary to purify relations among yourselves and likewise with the recipients of your evangelizing commitment;
- it is necessary to establish healthy relationships in healthy environments, in which it will be difficult for dominance to prevail (abuse is always an act of dominance by the abuser against the victim), enslavement, dependence, violation of freedom, violation of conscience, abuse of power, sexual abuse;
- lastly, we need to cultivate the necessary formation and education in this sense: a human, moral, intellectual and spiritual formation that can have a considerable impact on a large number of persons: in the family environment, in parishes, in the world of the young, in contact with the most vulnerable to whom you dedicate yourselves.

As your specificity is that of living in the ordinary reality of the world in which you work, study and act, you are entrusted today in a special way with a witness that cannot ignore the formation necessary to prevent abuse of any kind: sexual, conscience or power.

This theme concerns us, concerns you! Not only because, as you know and will hear from some witnesses, the plague of abuse does not spare the associations and ecclesial movements but precisely because of the enormous potential for prevention and formation available to you and that you must cultivate with concrete initiatives to be prepared and implemented.

Today's meeting must spur us on to perfect and realize, within a definite time frame and with active commitment, what was requested of you in the circular letter we sent out on 23rd May 2018, asking you to prepare rules and procedures aimed at protecting minors and vulnerable persons.

Not everybody replied. Many replies were incomplete. It is not always even clear to whom members can and must refer to report an abuse.

You must be properly equipped and, without wasting time, you must take on the responsibilities that are yours, give account of what has been entrusted to you, without diverting your attention from the wounds inflicted on the Body of Christ - the Church - in our brothers, taking care of those who have been wounded and acting so that abuse may no longer occur.