



DICASTERY FOR LAITY, FAMILY AND LIFE

Annual Meeting with the Moderators of the Ecclesial Movements “Prevention of Sexual Abuse: the Commitment of the Associations and Ecclesial Movements”

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Sexual Abuse: for a Shared Ecclesial Responsibility

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During the meeting dedicated to the protection of minors convened by the Holy Father at the Vatican in February, despite the clear invitation that resounded throughout the hall in the Holy Father's introductory speech and in the speakers' addresses, several Presidents of Episcopal Conferences said they had not implemented any procedures, not even to indicate to whom one could refer in the case of any sexual abuse because, according to them, similar brutalities did not occur in their territory. Two Presidents, in particular, ensured me that there were no cases of abuse in their areas. But the statistics - always insufficient owing to many victims' silence – portrayed a dramatic picture of the situation in those two countries.

It was evident that these two Bishops were unaware of any cases of abuse. In any case they had not set up any procedures for reporting them and, on the contrary, they denied *a priori* that there were any! How could any victims, who already go through so much self-torment before speaking, find the courage to refer to men of the Church who deny such cases *a priori*?

Being present at today's meeting as moderators or delegates of lay associations, ecclesial movements and new communities is, in itself, a sign of the availability of each one of you. And yet it is clear that being present is not enough. We need to let ourselves be called into question, to not deny anything *a priori*, to be ready, with the necessary humility, to learn and to confront each other with trust and without prejudice; and to be aware that this Dicastery of the Holy See, by means of

today's meeting, will be the interpreter of the priorities the Holy Father has identified for the service of the Universal Church and intends to be at your side, supporting you and accompanying you.

1. Listening to the Victims

During the meeting in February, we learned a very profitable working method, wanted by the Holy Father: a rigorous method that placed a long moment of listening to the victims as the first item on the agenda every day, followed by listening to the Word of God and by a time of silent reflection.

Listening to the victims before any discussions and activities was a method introduced by Benedict XVI who surprised the whole world when he held meetings with victims of abuse on many of his journeys¹. A method which Pope Francis has adopted and has asked us to do the same.

Beginning each reflection by listening beforehand to the victims changes our sometimes dismissive and resistant attitudes that tend to consider sexual abuse as a problem or a phenomenon – as the Prefect said – while forgetting about the people involved, their families, their lives: into which, as one victim wrote, a “seed of death” has been planted.

This particular young woman, whom we shall call Eleonora, a member of an association recognized by our Dicastery, only found the courage 20 years later to report acts of sexual abuse suffered for years in the association. Thanks to her, others found the courage to talk as well. However, she wrote: “I am worried above all about retaliation... I'm very scared to come out into the open but I want to find a way out of this system of silence that for years has stopped me from talking because I have finally understood that **staying silent has made things worse and prevented the truth from being revealed, making me an accomplice of evil and sin**. Although it is risky and even painful to make this statement, because I am still a member of the association, love for the truth and obedience to the Holy Father [...] come before any other personal risk. I am prepared to pay in person for this cause. This is my story!” [the part in bold is in the original].

¹ Let us recall the meeting with eight victims at the Apostolic Nunciature in Rabat on 18th April 2010, and similar meetings with victims during his journeys to the United States of America, Australia, the United Kingdom, Malta and Germany.

Eleonora tells us the facts, situates them in time and space, and includes many painful details and manipulative words that led her, at the age of 26, to become a victim of abuse: unable to escape precisely because of the psychological and spiritual manipulation used by the Priest, who was in a position of authority. She tells us: “our conversations gradually shifted to the question of emotions. [The priest] affirmed that psychological equilibrium and emotional maturity were necessary to take on the challenges of the vocation. Otherwise, he told me, one risks becoming inward-looking and prayer easily becomes a kind of spiritual masturbation, a way of escaping from reality [...] He continued by saying that, in his opinion, I was impenetrable and emotionally cold. The whole conversation was oriented towards convincing me that I needed to loosen up my body, that I should become freer and more affectionate, because otherwise I would run the risk of becoming a lesbian in the community. He said he was only doing this for my own good. Like a father, he wanted to help me acquire the necessary equilibrium to take on a life of prayer”. She continues: “He explained to me that even though there was nothing evil or sinful in this intimacy because we were both pure and had no ulterior motives, we should keep ‘our secret’. In his view this was a very high experience of intimacy among virgins”.

Listening to a testimony like this is not a way of indulging morbid curiosity, nor is it an exercise in commiseration, but a way calls upon our honesty and involves an encounter with the flesh of Christ into which wounds have been inflicted which, as Pope Francis has asserted many times, “never go away”².

Therefore we must not be afraid to draw nearer and listen to the words of those who, in our associations, may disturb us with painful news, because here we encounter the Body of Christ who, even when Risen, maintains the visible signs of his passion and death, and so this enables us, as Cardinal Tagle so masterfully expressed, to express the make the highest profession of our faith, but only if we are in contact with the wounds of humanity³.

² *Letter to the People of God*, 20th August 2018, no. 1.

³ see Luis Antonio G. TAGLE “The Smell of the Sheep. Knowing their pain and healing their wounds is at the core of the shepherd’s task” in *Consapevolezza e purificazione. Documents of the Meeting for the Protection of Minors in the Church (Vatican City, 21-24 February 2019)*, Vatican City 2019, 26-27. See also *EG*, 270: “At times we feel the temptation to be Christians by maintaining a prudent distance from the wounds of the Lord. But Jesus wants us to touch human misery, to touch the suffering flesh of others. He expects us to stop looking for those personal or community shelters that allow us to keep a distance from the crux of human drama”.

2. Why are we called to account as ecclesial movements?

Let us move onto another point. Why must we study, today, as ecclesial movements, the question of sexual abuse?

We can give ourselves an initial answer: we are studying it because it is a widespread, socially damaging problem that pervades the lives of many families and it is necessary to solve it by developing adequate strategies.

This is an answer inspired by valid reasons, that situate us socially, and urgently demand our commitment, but no more or less than the commitment required of each man and each woman, Catholic or not, Christian or not.

Indubitably, this commitment weighs heavily upon us, as it does on every man and woman of good will, regardless of their religious, confessional or political beliefs. But the reason for us lies in our being members of the Church. If we are living members, I, too, feel the wounds of one member, and they cause me pain. If I do not feel any pain, then it is because I am severed from the body, perhaps even with the presumption of being able to fend for myself.

As baptized persons, committed in our associative ecclesial realities, we are constituted as members of an ecclesial body, born and destined for communion.

Therefore, the “shared ecclesial responsibility” indicated in the title of this paper, is not grounded on merely social reasons, but is instead rooted in the very nature of the Church as a mystery of communion in which we are born and which urges us not to “cut ourselves off” or - even worse - to cut off inconvenient members because they are wounded.

Only by relying on this baptismal foundation in the name of the common priesthood with which we are vested, do each of our actions urge us on and take on meaning as an answer to the challenges flowing from abuses perpetrated on our more vulnerable brothers and sisters: abuses which fracture this communion.

It is salutary, as lay faithful, to always return, with gratitude and concern, to our belonging to the Church as a body. There are two passages from the Apostolic Exhortation on the Lay Faithful, *Christifideles laici* that help us: “Only from inside the Church's mystery of communion is the “identity” of the lay faithful made known, and their fundamental dignity revealed. Only within

the context of this dignity can their vocation and mission in the Church and in the world be defined” (*ChL*, 8).

Thus, this belonging of ours assigns us the name and, in the name, also the mission with which we are entrusted. In recalling the dignity of the lay faithful as sons and daughters, as baptized, sharing in the “threefold mission of Jesus Christ - priestly, prophetic and kingly -”, *Christifideles laici* highlights our participation in the prophetic mission of Christ with “the ability and responsibility to accept the gospel in faith and to proclaim it in word and deed, without hesitating to courageously identify and denounce evil”.” (*ChL*, 14).

This renewed awareness - baptismal, ecclesial and communal - drives us to take care, in a competent, responsible and loving way, of the people involved, and of what has happened to them, so that prevention goes beyond good intentions and becomes our everyday pastoral attitude.

Because the responsibility entrusted to us is fundamental, and in no way secondary, and is intimately connected with our being Church, we cannot be in peace with even our best associative pastoral programmes if we are not engaged in today’s Kairos of ecclesial communion.

3. The drama of sexual abuse and abuse of power and conscience.

Yet even this shared communion is sometimes manipulated for ulterior motives.

The following words come from a recent letter from another victim, whom we shall call Susan, who also belonged to a lay association when she suffered sexual abuse by a priest in a position of responsibility in the association: “Precisely in the name of the Trinitarian communion he asked me and the others for “naked communion” – that’s what he called it – and all the rest together with silence. It was precisely this rigid “communion” structure and the distortion of Trinitarian communion that allowed humiliation, subjection, manipulation, abuse of power, abuse of conscience and sexual abuse, and which allowed them to continue, aided by our own silence.”

These tortures suffered for 15 consecutive years in the name of a purported ‘Trinitarian communion’ help us understand how much we need to purify our concept of ecclesial communion.

As Susan testifies, sexual abuse is committed in the name of a misinterpreted and manipulated communion, but other abuses of power and conscience are committed in ways that are even more subtle.

Susan explains it very well: “During my experience at the association, I became painfully aware that another thing that favours these abuses of power is a distorted interpretation and practice flowing from a “charism of synthesis” which, in exercising government, , became self-reference, self-fulfilment, the functional use of persons on the basis of the needs of the moment and, after a semblance of community discernment, referring everything to the decisions of an individual leader [...] The “charism of synthesis” inevitably becomes the “synthesis of charisms” and one ends up stagnating in a pyramidal structure, all the while affirming that government is done in shared responsibility and in respecting the principle of subsidiarity”.

Abuse is part of a dynamic of power, supremacy and domination over one or more persons who are in a situation of existential vulnerability and dependence: this can be due to age, circumstances of life or personal emotional needs. Therefore, let us be wary, in similar cases, of talking about consenting adults!

Those who commit sexual abuse choose their victims, secure their own safety by means of a systematic power game in which emotional manipulation and the perverse reorganization of the victims’ daily reality play a central role. Thus, sexual abuse comes from afar, and is prepared and preceded by a series of abuses of power. Sexual abuse is the tip of the iceberg of a system of abuses. Always. Manipulation isolates victims, creating a barrier between them and the world, in such a way that the abuser can secure a central position in the life of the victims, reducing them to silence as recounted by Eleonora and Susan, mentioned above.

“It is difficult – says Pope Francis – to grasp the phenomenon of the sexual abuse of minors without considering power, since this abuse is always the consequence of an abuse of power, an exploitation of the inferiority and vulnerability of the abused that makes possible the manipulation of their conscience and their psychological and physical weakness”⁴.

4. Spiritual effects of abusive relationships

Abusive behaviour, be it sexual abuse, abuse of power or abuse of conscience, all closely interconnected, not only damages the Church and her identity, causing distrust, doubts and scandal,

⁴ FRANCESCO, “Concluding Remarks”, in: *Consapevolezza e purificazione. Documents of the meeting for the Protection of Minors in the Church (Vatican City 21-24 February 2019)*, Vatican City 2019, 159-160.

but also creates often irreversible damage to the victims, producing psychological trauma, inability to take on commitments, permanent spiritual damage and loss of the Faith.

Another victim, Renate, expresses very clearly the spiritual consequences of the abuse she suffered for years: “In these experiences of abuse” - that Renate suffered first from one priest and then from a second, to whom she had been referred for help to recover from past abuse - “I can say that something was sown in my soul and my entire person something very similar to death. Today, and this increases with the passing of the years, I feel I no longer have any access to God, that I can no longer communicate with him, either on my own or in community prayer. As a result, I have the feeling I have been cast aside: excluded from this communion, from the presence of God, and from His love. Personal prayer becomes more and more difficult, and when I stay in silence in a place of prayer, I am assailed by the images and the memories of the abuse I suffered – and that only now I know was abuse [...] I am overcome with disgust for the things of God. This is something even more intolerable, because I have given my whole life to Him! I suffer much when I go to confession: I am no longer able to live out this sacrament for what I know it to be, because something has become irremediably knotted up in my innermost being [...] Since I am often assailed by many temptations to abandon my commitment in the Community, I feel guilty about not being fully truthful with the others [...] And how can I be certain that the discernment of my vocation is not flawed, since it occurred during spiritual direction and in confessions in which two men of the Church abused me since I came of age? How can I believe that one day I will be able to recognize God’s will for me?”

She adds: “Today, together with those who have reported abuse, I am the target of ferocious criticism, and of violent opposition from some, even including some Pastors, who continue to repeat that one of those priests was a very good man. It is a new betrayal that comes from inside the Church. These people are, in my eyes, howling wolves who break into the sheep fold to further frighten and scatter the flock, while it should be they, the Pastors of the Church, who take care of the lambs and protect them”.

These words speak for themselves.

5. The engagement of the associations and the ecclesial movements.

The challenge today, in your ecclesial aggregations, consists in creating healthy environments in true and free service of the Lord and the Gospel. Information and transparent procedures are necessary. You must invest in an adequate affective-sexual formation. It is also necessary to rethink the structures. You might tell me that often you have no structures. However, there are relational structures and dynamics whenever you meet among yourselves and with the beneficiaries of your apostolate, and these strongly influence people, their development, their growth and their freedom.

As Hans Zollner observes in one of his studies, “diverse *structured* realities that claim they are very secure, once they exceed a certain limit of structuring become rigid and restrictive, increasing the risk of abuse. Unfortunately, every day we see ecclesiastic institutions and bodies which considered themselves very close to Church doctrine and carrying the flag of orthodoxy, and which, today, are under trial for abuse” [...] “The other extreme is represented by the *under-structured* institutions in which there is too much fluidity, where there are no precise rules and above all there are no clear reference points. And yet, balance and clarity in roles and in responsibilities help in the work of prevention”⁵.

An authoritarian and restrictive managerial style, based on strict rules, that does not really involve members, and does not inform them or consult them properly, communicates subliminal group messages that exclude those who have criticisms. It is also when there is a lack of regulation and when roles are not very clear that relationships are created in which there is a higher risk of abuse of every kind.

Therefore, the ecclesial responsibility entrusted to us requires us to be vigilant and not to be naïve, to prevent by establishing healthy, free and disinterested relationships.

It was Renate who wrote how the lack of distinction between the realm of conscience and the realm of government was a cause of confusion for her: her abuser was both the head of her workplace and her confessor and spiritual director. It was only after this association changed its statutes to distinguish roles that reports of abuse emerged and, according to Renate, a deterrent to abuse of any kind was established.

⁵ Hans ZOLLNER, “La tutela dei minori e la prevenzione”, in *Abusi sessuali nella Chiesa? Meglio prevenire*, Luisa BOVE, ed.). Milan 2017, 24-25.

6. Concluding remarks: from Golgotha to prophecy

Eleonora, Susan, Renate: these are women from three different associations of the faithful. They are women who, like all victims of abuse of power, of conscience and of sexual abuse, have experienced a Golgotha that lasted for years: a Golgotha that was not under the open sky but confined within four walls, where hardly any light penetrated, consummated with blackmail which bought their silence filled them with a sense of guilt. The abuse nailed them to a cross that no-one could see because it was raised in a secret Golgotha. Sometimes, even others who knew or suspected it were also victims or accomplices, thus creating a system of physical, moral, psychological and spiritual abuse.

Let us take the lid off these dark Golgothas. The Dicastery is at your side to advise and support you in this shared ecclesial responsibility. We have the honesty and courage to break with conspiracies of manipulation and abuse, to live out our vocation and mission of announcing freedom to prisoners, and to proclaim that the Lord, “has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in heart; he has brought down rulers from their thrones and has lifted up the humble” (Lk 1, 51-53)

This is the Prophecy that has been entrusted to us, by virtue of baptism and our being living members of the Church. Let us act as a Church, like a mother who does not sell her children into prostitution and does not set up new Golgothas, but prevents them, with awareness and wisdom, by investing in adequate formation and training.

It is women like Susan who ask us to do this; - in the meantime, she has begun a long path of healing. let me conclude with her words: “While it is true that wounds do not benefit from a statute of limitations, it is also true that I believe, in faith, that the Risen Jesus is capable of transforming them and rendering them glorious like his own. Rather than being a ‘victim’, now I feel like a ‘survivor’ from the power of death, because before me I see that the stone has been rolled away and that the tomb is empty. In that garden, I meet the Risen Jesus, my Master and my Lord, who calls me tenderly by my name every single day.”