

Vatican asks victims to see church as ally in fighting abuse

John L. Allen Jr. | Oct. 31, 2010 NCR Today

After roughly sixty victims of sexual abuse by Catholic clergy in various nations held a vigil Sunday near St. Peter's Square, a delegation of the victims met with Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi, the Vatican spokesperson. Lombardi gave the victims a letter pledging to work towards "solidarity and consensus between us."

"Of course, we must continue to do more. And your cry today is an encouragement to do more," Lombardi wrote.

"But a large part of the church is already on the good path. The major part of the crimes belong to times bygone. Today's reality and that of tomorrow are more beckoning. Let us help one another to journey together in the right direction."

Editor's Note: See our earlier story: [Vatican denies squelching coverage of victims' rally](#) [1]

Lombardi asked the victims to see the Catholic church as an "ally" in the fight against abuse, wherever it occurs.

"This fight must be fought by us together, uniting our forces against the spread of this scourge," he wrote.

Lombardi acknowledged that the church has learned about the reality of abuse in part because of what the victims of priestly abuse, including victims' groups, have taught it.

Lombardi provided the full text of his letter to the victims to *NCR*, which appears below.

The vigil, billed as "Reformation Day," was organized by "Survivors Voice," a group led by two Boston-area abuse victims from the United States, Gary Bergeron and Bernie McDaid. In April 2008, McDaid was one of five victims who met Pope Benedict XVI in Washington, D.C., the pontiff's first encounter with victims of sexual abuse.

According to Italian news reports, Lombardi walked from his Vatican office to the area near Castel Sant'Angelo, roughly five minutes away, where the victims had gathered. They had been denied permission to assemble in St. Peter's Square itself, though a few victims entered the square individually to deliver letters to the Vatican, where were received by a Swiss Guard.

ANSA, an Italian news agency, reported that when Lombardi approached the victims, a couple yelled "Shame!" Later, however, Lombardi met with a group of eight victims in his office at Vatican Radio for almost an hour.

In comments to the media, McDaid and Bergeron were critical of the church's response to the sexual abuse crisis.

"No other institution would be permitted to protect its own management the way they do," McDaid was quoted as saying.

Bergeron said "there's no person, in any position or any institution, in any part of the world, whose importance ought to rank above defending children or the law."

VATICAN LETTER TO SEXUAL ABUSE VICTIMS

On the occasion of "Reformation Day", organised by "Survivor's Voice"

By Fr. Lombardi

The windows of my office at Vatican Radio are just a few metres away, and therefore it seems fitting to me to listen, and to make a tangible sign of our attention, to your meeting.

This intervention of mine is not an official one, but because of my deep insertion and identification with the Catholic Church and the Holy See, I believe I can express the feelings shared by many regarding the object of your manifestation.

In this, I feel encouraged by the attitude of the Pope, made manifest many times, that is, to listen to the victims, and show the will to do everything necessary, so that the horrible crimes of sexual abuse may never happen again.

I must say that, even though I do not share all of your declarations and positions, I find in many of these the elements on which one can develop a pledge, that will bring solidarity and consensus between us.

It is true that the Church must be very attentive so that the children and the young, who are entrusted to her educational activities, may grow in a completely secure environment.

Yesterday morning, a hundred thousand young people were present in these places for a great celebration of their faith and of their youthfulness, and they are but a small part of the youths who take part with trust and enthusiasm in the life of the Church community. We must absolutely ensure that their growth be healthy and serene, finding all the protection which is rightfully theirs. We all have a great responsibility with regards to the future of the youth of the world.

It is true that the procedures of investigation and of intervention must be ever swifter and more effective, whether from the Church or from the civil authorities, and that there must be a good collaboration between these two, in conformity to the laws and situations of the countries concerned.

I know, you think that the Church should do more, and in a quicker way. From my point of view "even though one may and should always do more" I am convinced that the Church has done, and is doing a lot. Not only the Pope, with his words and example, but many Church communities in various parts of the world have done and are doing a lot, by way of listening to the victims as well as in the matter of prevention and formation.

Personally, I am in contact with many persons who work in this field in many countries, and I am convinced that they are doing a lot. Of course, we must continue to do more. And your cry today is an encouragement to do more. But a large part of the Church is already on the good path. The major part of the crimes belongs to times bygone. Today's reality and that of tomorrow are more beckoning. Let us help one another to journey together in the right direction.

But the more important thing that I wanted to say to you is the following, and I feel encouraged to say it,

because it seems to me that you also are aware of it.

The scourge of sexual abuses, especially against minors, but also in a general way, is one of the great scourges of today's world. It involves and touches the Catholic Church, but we know very well that what has happened in the Church is but a small part of what has happened, and continues to happen in the world at large. The Church must first free herself of this evil, and give a good example in the fight against the abuses within her midst, but afterwards, we must all fight against this scourge, knowing that it is an immense one in today's world, a scourge which increases the more easily when it remains hidden; and many are indeed very happy that all the attention is focussed on the Church, and not on them, for this allows them to carry on undisturbed.

This fight must be fought by us together, uniting our forces against the spread of this scourge, which uses new means and ways to reach out today, helped in this by internet and the new forms of communication, by the crisis hitting families, by sexual tourism and traffic which exploit the poverty of the people in various continents.

What the Church has learnt in these years ? prompted also by you and by other groups ? and the initiatives that she can take to purify herself and be a model of security for the young, must be of use to all. For this, I invite you to look at the Church ever more as a possible ally, or ? according to me ? as an ally already active today in the pursuit of the most noble goals of your endeavours.

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