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Vatican abuse summit: Victim reports 'death of respect' for church leaders

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NCR Today

Victim calls summit a sign of hope

ROME -- An Irish victim of sexual abuse bluntly told a Vatican summit this morning that her experience of being ignored, and her suffering minimized, by church leaders caused "the final death of any respect" she once felt for ecclesial authority.

Marie Collins said there must be "acknowledgement and accountability for the harm and destruction that has been done to the life of victims and their families" before she and other victims can regain trust in the leadership of the Catholic church.

Collins made the remarks at a four-day summit on the sexual abuse crisis titled "Towards Healing and Renewal" being held at the Jesuit-run Gregorian University.

In remarks to the press after her talk, Collins expressed hope that the symposium suggests the church is moving in the right direction.

"I am very hopeful about this conference. I think the fact that it is taking place here in Rome with the backing of the Vatican and the pope is a sign that the church is taking this issue very seriously and wants a global response," she said.

"I think this conference is a sign of changing mindsets," Collins said. "People are very seriously and sincerely trying to get this thing right".

Collins told participants she was abused at the age of thirteen, just after her confirmation, by a chaplain in a hospital where she was recovering from an illness. As a deeply faithful Catholic at the time, she said, the experience was deeply traumatic.

“Those fingers that would abuse my body the night before were the next morning holding and offering me the sacred host,” she said, explaining that her initial response was to blame herself.

At the age of 47, she said, she made an initial report of her experience to a parish priest in Ireland.

“This priest refused to take the name of my abuser and said he saw no need to report the chaplain,” she said. “He told me what had happened was probably my fault. This response shattered me.”

Collins said she then turned to the Archbishop of the Dublin, at the time Cardinal Desmond Connell, with no better results.

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“The priest who had sexually assaulted me was protected by his superiors from prosecution,” she said. “He was left for months in his parish ministry which included mentoring children preparing for confirmation – the safety of those children ignored by his superiors.”

The priest was later convicted, Collins said, for assaulting another young girl. Connell, who resigned in 2004, is now 85.

“The Archbishop considered my abuse ‘historical’ so felt it would be unfair to tarnish the priest’s ‘good name’ now,” Collins said. “I have heard this argument from others in leadership in the Catholic Church and always there is blindness to the current risk to children from these men.”

Taken together, Collins said, those experiences produced a loss of faith – not in God, but in the leadership of the church.

“The final death of any respect that might have survived in me towards my religious leaders came after my abuser’s conviction,” she said. “I learned that the diocese had discovered, just months after my abuse, that this priest was abusing children in the hospital but did nothing about it except move him to a new parish.”

Going forward, she said that accountability, not just apologies, is the key to restoring trust.

“How do I regain my respect for the leadership of my Church? Apologizing for the actions of the abusive priests is not enough. There must be acknowledgement and accountability for the harm and destruction that has been done to the life of victims and their families by the often deliberate cover up and mishandling of cases by their superiors before I or other victims can find real peace and healing.”

Sheila Hollins, a psychiatrist and advisor to the English bishops, told participants that Collins’ perspective is widely shared among victims.

“Not being believed or even worse, being blamed for the abuse, adds hugely to the emotional and mental suffering caused by sexual abuse,” Hollins said.

?The failure of an abuser to admit his guilt, or of his superiors to take appropriate action, further compounds the damage.?

There are 23 Americans among summit participants, including Bishop Daniel Conlon of Joliet, Illinois, who chairs the bishops' Committee for Child and Youth Protection.

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