

Vatican abuse summit: A 'new baseline' for the church

John L. Allen Jr. | Feb. 9, 2012 NCR Today

ROME -- A four-day Vatican summit on the sexual abuse crisis signals 'a new baseline', meaning a new 'agreed standard of the Roman Catholic Church' in dealing with the issue, according to one of the participants.

Fr. Brendan Geary, a Scottish member of the Marist order who works in the United States, defined that baseline in the following terms:

- 'We start by listening to victims, and we honor their experience.'
- 'We're trying to become leaders in the world in the protection of children, not following behind others.'
- 'In the words of Pope John Paul II, there is no place in the Catholic church for those who would abuse children.'

Commitment to those three principles, Geary said, 'came across clearly from every part of the world' during the Feb. 6-9 event.

Geary spoke in a session with reporters on the final day of the four-day symposium, titled 'Towards Healing and Renewal.' It has been held at Rome's Jesuit-run Gregorian University, in cooperation with several Vatican departments.

Claretian Fr. Paul Smyth stressed that this new baseline did not begin at this summit, but is instead 'the fruit of several decades of work' which doesn't mean, he stressed, that the job is finished.

'We need to walk the talk,' Smyth said.

The success or failure of the event will be measured by its ability to 'put down a marker that will enable the church to be the safest place possible for children going forward,' said Sr. Marianne O'Connor of Ireland.

Nigerian Bishop Joseph Ekwem said the summit's value has been to force the church 'to accept what has really happened.'

'We can't bury our heads in the sand and pretend that nothing has happened,' Ekwem told reporters. 'We have to acknowledge the suffering [of victims]. We can't deny that, and we have to find a way forward.'

Ekwem said that to date, the Nigerian bishops have not had a single formal report of clerical abuse of a child, but he doesn't take that as an indication the problem doesn't exist. The summit, he said, 'will help us be prepared when the cases arise.'

Sr. Marian Moriarty of the United Kingdom said the summit has been useful not only in outlining the dimensions of the Catholic sex abuse scandals, but also wider social pathologies. For instance, she said, she was shocked to hear one estimate that \$75,000 is spent every minute in cyber-space on Internet pornography.

tIn that sense, Moriarty said, the summit was also a reminder that the experience accumulated by the church in the fight against abuse can also be of service to the wider society.

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