NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Francis first to mention abuse scandals on Brazil trip

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World Youth Day 2013
Rio de Janeiro

If proof were ever required of how profoundly Francis has turned around public impressions of the Catholic church, consider this: He?s been in the global spotlight now for five consecutive days in Brazil, and no one brought up the church?s sexual abuse mess until, admittedly indirectly, he did so himself tonight.

Francis? language was oblique, and it takes a bit of exegesis to connect the dots between what he actually said and the abuse crisis.

Tonight brought World Youth Day's traditional Via Crucis procession, marking the Stations of the Cross. Francis offered a reflection at the end, which was largely a meditation on the meaning of the Cross.

At one stage the pope spoke about Jesus on the Cross being unified with everyone who suffers.

?Jesus, with his Cross, walks with us and takes upon himself our fears, our problems, and our sufferings, even those which are deepest and most painful,? the pope said.

That includes, Francis said, those who ?have lost their faith in the church, or even in God, because of the lack of consistency of Christians and ministers of the Gospel.?

?How much Jesus suffers for this lack of consistency,? the pope said.

The category of ?lack of consistency? obviously covers a lot of ground, and probably includes all the temptations Francis has repeatedly denounced since becoming pope ? careerism, vanity, self-interest, and so on. Yet in the context of the last two decades of the church?s life, it will be difficult for most people not to hear an echo of the sex abuse scandals too.

Asked today by NCR if he felt the pope was referring to the abuse scandals, Cardinal Sean O?Malley of Boston said, ?I?m sure that?s an aspect of it.?

That veiled allusion marks the first time the scandals have surfaced in discussion about the pope during his July 22-28 trip to Brazil ? a trip which marks World Youth Day, an occasion that seemingly might lend itself to an examination of the church?s record with regard to the protection of young people.

In some ways, it?s striking there hasn?t been more talk about it. For one thing, Francis has not specifically addressed abuse crisis much in his first four and a half months on the job.

In early April, the Vatican issued a statement saying that Francis had directed one of his top deputies that he wants ?decisive action? to reach out to victims, prevent future abuse, and punish perpetrators. Since that statement, however, there?s been relatively little in terms of concrete developments.

So far, for instance, no bishops have been removed from office by Pope Francis for their roles in the abuse crisis, which is often a litmus test for reform among victims? groups and media commentators.

Earlier this month, Francis approved a new legal code for the Vatican City State which, among other things, established stiffer penalties for sexual violence against children and possession of child pornography. The new laws, however, merely codified policy decisions that had already been made under Benedict XVI, and they apply only to residents of the 108-acre City State and to Vatican personnel around the world.

People seem eager for action. A Pew Forum survey in March found that 70 percent of American Catholics believe addressing the abuse scandals should be a top priority for the new pope, a higher percentage than for any other single issue.

For now, the Vatican can bask in what has been a week of largely positive stories about the new pope, and expressions of optimism about the church?s prospects under his leadership. Eventually, however, there may come a time when Francis won?t have to raise the sex abuse question himself.

Wrapping up his meditation tonight, Francis said the Cross also offers ?certainty of the unshakable love that God has for us ? a love so great that it enters into our sin and forgives it, enters into our suffering and gives us the strength to bear it.?

?The Cross of Christ contains all the love of God, his immeasurable mercy,? he said.

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For Brazilians in particular, another line from the Via Crucis remarks tonight is also likely to catch attention.

In the same line in which the pope refers to a ?lack of consistency? by Christians and their ministers, he also says that Jesus is united ?with so many young people who have lost their faith in political institutions, because they seem in them only selfishness and corruption.?

Precisely those impressions helped to fuel the massive street protests witnessed in Brazilian cities in June, which were sparked largely by young activists, often drawing on social media.

In context, the pope?s language this evening will likely be taken locally as an acknowledgement of the frustrations felt by many Brazilians, and thus a nod, if not directly an endorsement, of the aims of the protest movement.

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