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Pope expresses prayers for sex abuse victims to Dutch bishops

Joshua J. McElwee | Dec. 2, 2013 NCR Today
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Update, Dec. 3: Several Dutch news outlets are reporting that Pope Francis did not speak the remarks of his prepared text to the Dutch bishops, but instead held an informal conversation with them for about 90 minutes Dec. 2. According to reports, the pope handed the prelates copies of the prepared remarks, which were written in French.

Original story: Pope Francis for the first time on Monday publicly discussed the issue of clergy sex abuse, telling Catholic bishops from the Netherlands he wished to express sympathy for victims in their country.

The pope mentioned the abuse scandal, which has continued to rock the Catholic church globally, towards the end of his remarks to the bishops. 13 Dutch prelates were part of the meeting, which comes as they are making their *ad limina* visit to Rome.

?I promise compassion and prayer for every victim of sexual abuse and their families," the pope told the prelates in remarks prepared in French.

"I ask you to continue supporting them on their painful path to healing, undertaken with courage," he wrote, according to the Vatican's text of his remarks.

The sex abuse scandal has particularly impacted the Dutch Catholic church. A 2011 report [1] by a inquiry commission created by the Dutch government said church officials had ?failed to adequately deal with? abuse affecting as many as 20,000 of the country's children in Catholic institutions between 1945 and 1981.

While the issue of clergy sex abuse has been mentioned tangentially since Francis' election as pope in March, this is the first time the pontiff addressed the issue directly and in a public statement to bishops.

A statement in April from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, the Vatican office responsible for prosecuting clerics suspected or found guilty of abuse, said the pope had said then to "act decisively as far as cases of sexual abuse are concerned."

The pope also told the Dutch bishops Monday to seek to be close to people who are suffering from "spiritual emptiness" and are looking for meaning in their lives. He also encouraged the prelates to confront continuing secularization in Europe not only through proselytizing but also by attracting people to the Christian life.

"Let us ask anyone who encounters us -- who meets a Christian-- has he seen something of the goodness of God, the joy of having met Christ?" the pope asked. "As I have often said ... the church grows not by proselytizing but attraction."

One Dutch bishop said following the meeting that the pope had "strengthened" him and his peers.

"The pope has really strengthened us in the faith and in the way in which the Dutch bishops are working in the

Dutch church," said Bishop Theodorus Hoogenboom, an auxiliary bishop of Utrecht, Netherlands' capital.

"The key word of what the pope said to us is the word *speranza*, which is hope," said Hoogenboom, who spoke outside St. Peter's Square after leaving the audience.

"The hope that Christ is with us and that also in the more difficult times ... the pope is with us," he said. "The situation in the Netherlands with secularization is rather difficult, but the pope has strengthened us in the faith like St. Peter."

The meeting with the Dutch prelates had originally been scheduled for Thursday but was pushed forward because the pope is also meeting this week with the eight cardinals he has tasked with advising him on reform of the Vatican's central bureaucracy.

In October, several reports said the pope had mentioned to that group then that he was considering setting up some sort of national or regional system of church courts around the world to handle sex abuse cases.

In advance of the Dutch bishops' meeting with the pope Monday, a group of Dutch lay Catholics had organized a Facebook page for Catholics in the country to leave comments about and hopes for their country's church.

Named *Pauspetitie*, "Pope Petition" in Dutch, organizers said the page [2] has received some 20,000 visits since October. Additionally, nearly 300 comments were left by Catholics, said Joost Verhoef, a pastoral worker in Amsterdam who helped lead the initiative.

Bishop Gerard de Korte of the northern Dutch diocese of Groningen-Leeuwarden said Monday the pope did not mention the petition in his meeting with the prelates.

Speaking to the Dutch Catholic broadcasting network RKK, De Korte also said the Dutch bishops had focused in their written report to the pope for their *ad limina* visit on issues of catechesis but that Francis seemed more interested in issues of charity.

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