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Church must always protect, support children against abuse, pope says

by Carol Glatz by Catholic News Service

The Francis Chronicles

Vatican City — Children and young people must always be protected against sexual abuse and always find adequate support in the church community, Pope Francis told the Vatican doctrinal office dealing with suspected cases of sexual abuse by clergy.

The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith should also look at ways to collaborate with a new papal advisory commission on abuse, which, the pope said, he wants to be an exemplary model for child protection.

"I want to thank you for your dedication to dealing with the delicate set of problems concerning the so-called most grave crimes, in particular cases of sexual abuse of minors by clerics," Pope Francis said in a written speech Friday.

He called on the congregation, which was given exclusive jurisdiction over a number of these most serious crimes in 2001, to focus on "the well-being of children and young people, who in the Christian community must always be protected and supported in their human and spiritual growth," he said.

The pope asked the doctrinal office to also study ways it could cooperate with the special commission for the protection of young people he established in December.

While the pope has yet to name who will be on the new advisory commission, he said in his speech that he wants the new body to be "exemplary for everyone who is charged with promoting the well-being of children."

Less than a month after his March 13 election, Pope Francis met with the congregation's prefect, Cardinal-designate Gerhard Muller, reaffirming the importance of continuing "to act decisively concerning cases of sexual abuse," according to a Vatican statement.

The pope wanted the congregation to continue promoting measures to protect children; to offer care and help for victims; to implement necessary procedures against those found guilty; and to have bishops' conferences formulate and implement appropriate directives for child protection, the statement had said.

The pope's meeting and speech Friday addressed Muller and members, advisers and other people taking part in the congregation's plenary assembly.

Pope Francis asked the congregation to work in such a way that "the criteria of faith prevail in the words and practice of the church."

The faith needs to shine "in its simplicity and original purity," he said, so God may appear in all his glory and bring people to Christ.

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Unfortunately there has always existed "the temptation to interpret doctrine in an ideological sense or to reduce it to a collection of abstract and crystallized theories," he said.

Instead, "doctrine has the sole aim of serving the life of the people of God and is meant to ensure our faith has a sure foundation."

However, the temptation is still great for people to "to appropriate for ourselves the gifts of salvation that comes from God, to domesticate them -- perhaps also with good intentions -- according to the views and spirit of the world."

Safeguarding the purity and integrity of the faith is "a very delicate task" and must be done in collaboration and with a spirit of communion with local pastors and the doctrinal offices of the world's bishops' conferences, he said.

The congregation tries to maintain "constructive, respectful and patient dialogue" in its work, the pope noted. If truth demands fidelity, he said, fidelity "always grows in charity and brotherly assistance for those who are called to mature or clarify their convictions."

Dialogue, communion and collegiality with all parties are key, he added.

"I am certain that the more collegiality will be the actual way we work, the more the light of our faith will shine before the world," he said.

He also noted the plenary reflected on an issue retired Pope Benedict XVI had designated for further study: the need to look more closely at people's faith and the sacrament of marriage.

In a January 2013 speech to the Roman Rota, the now-retired pope asked for closer reflection on the impact a person's lack of faith in God could have on the validity of marriage.

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